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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Writing the Self: Feminist Autography in the United States

BY

© Jeanne Martha Perreault

A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Writing the Self: Feminist Autography in the United States submitted by Jeanne Martha Perreault in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Shirley Neuman
Supervisor

Bert Cardullo

Rosemary Sullivan

External Reader

Date: May 28, 1984

Dedication

It is with great pleasure that
I dedicate this thesis
to my beloved daughter,
Jennifer Elsa Perreault

Abstract

This thesis challenges traditional conceptions of autobiography and demonstrates the inadequacy of current critical approaches to self and text as it examines contemporary writing of the self by United States feminists. Looking to new feminist configurations of subjectivity and textuality, the thesis develops a view of specifically feminist stategies of writing the self (autography). This study of feminist autographical processes is much less concerned with the narrative of life events than it is with the self as the writing constructs it. Feminist autography manifests the evolution of a female subjectivity not contained by the assumptions that define the dominant discourse of our culture. I contend that feminist discourse, hence the feminist community, is grounded in this writing of self.

My project looks to various feminist writers of the self (including Audre Lorde, Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich, Wendy Rose, Cherrie Moraga and others) for an autography that makes the female body the site and source of written subjectivity, while inhabiting that body with the ethics of a political, historical, sexual and racial consciousness. These writers, in and of feminist community, give voice to transformations of identity and of culture, and this thesis sees itself as a participant in that movement.

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Table of Contents

Chapter		Page
I.	The Mainstream	1
II.	The Feminist Subject and the Asymmetrical Self	35
III.	Counting the Cost: Adrienne Rich	67
IV.	"Our dead behind us": Kate Millett's The Basement	131
V.	"We're all we've got": Intersected Sisterhood	174
Bibliography		205

Chapter One: The Mainstream: Theories of Self-Writing

For feminists, to name the self (autonomy) and to write the self (autography)[1] is to engage a transformation of givens about women and about language. Understanding feminist autography requires attention to the peculiarly blurred space and ideological mediation between ideas of "self" and ideas of writing. The belief that language is "transparent" and simply representative has little theoretical support these days; and belief in a "self" as a unified entity is undermined by feminist thought as well as by current psychoanalytic and philosophical thought. This thesis looks to contemporary feminist texts from the United States for a writing of self that makes the female body a site and source of written subjectivity, yet inhabits that individual body with the ethics of a deeply and precisely historical, political, sexual and racial consciousness. That written self defies some of the most provocative aspects of contemporary theory and reinforces the tentative proposals of feminist theorists that a new kind of subjectivity is evolving. My argument thus works in several parts: I survey traditional and contemporary

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[1] For other uses of this word see Michael Ryan, "Self-Evidence" in Diacritics (June 1980) 6; and Jane Gallop, "Writing and Sexual Difference: The Difference Within" in Writing and Sexual Difference, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 284; and The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography From the Tenth to the Twentieth Century, ed. Domna C. Stanton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

autobiographical theory to expose certain assumptions about the concept of a written self, I examine recent feminist incursions into theories of subjecthood and textuality, and then, in the body of the thesis, I trace movements of self-in-language as it appears in various feminist texts.

"If we don't name ourselves we are nothing."[2] In this declaration, Audre Lorde predicates being to naming: those who are named by others have no way to exist in and for themselves. The possibilities of naming the self are suggested by the cover/title of her first piece of long prose: Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, Biomythography by Audre Lorde. The cover shows a snapshot of two people, backs to the camera looking in a store window; the lighting and their clothing, hair, and stance prevent easy recognition of their race and sex. The "old" spelling (Audre Lorde), the new spelling (Zami), and the self-reflexive information that the title gives IS the "New Spelling." Together Lorde's names work to perplex ideas of naming just as the snapshot images perplex easy notions of racial or sexual identity. The invented word "biomythography" makes explicit the confluence of writing life and writing myth. Without even opening Lorde's book, we meet the recurring obsessions of contemporary autobiographical theory, literary criticism, and feminist writing: the problematics of self and self-representation.

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[2] Audre Lorde, "An Interview With Karla Hammond," American Poetry Review (March-April, 1980) 19.

This example of a feminist text confounds traditional notions of what a "self" or a "text" is. Those notions have usually included clear demarcations between inner and outer experience; between private and public life; between self and others. Traditional views of self and text (that is, autobiography) have perpetuated and manifested belief in the continuity, consistency, and coherence of each; belief in the possiblity of telling the truth about each; belief that there is "a truth" to be told; and belief that conventional discourse is adequate to that task. More current thinking, often spoken of as post-modernist, defies those beliefs and argues for a deconstructive approach to texts and selves. Both these views constitute an ideology of authority over the definitions of self-hood and textuality. The small group of people--middle-class, white, men--with easy, assumed access to language as a public medium have produced the theories of autobiography that define the significant subject. This is still the group with the greatest access to writing and publication, and consequently is the voice of public definitions of self.

Definitions of self or identity, in the public domain of written language, articulate male experience and conditions of subjecthood. To make one's life a public presence may not be to the taste of every man but it does not undermine a sense of male identity. Feminist literary critics have observed, on the other hand, that women writing

at all complicates the "I" who is female.[3] The complacent "I" cannot exist in women's writing generally because social definitions or categories continue to suggest that women's lives are insignificant, that women live nothing of public or general interest, and that private lives are best lived submerged in the needs of others. This insidious, ubiquitous information is conveyed either by the silence of exclusion from a public existence or (in North America at least) by an overwhelming representation of women not as agents of their own identity but as domestic or sexual servers.[4] Many women grow up with a sense of identity diminished, trivialized, utterly private, named by/for a father, then later renamed by/for a husband, in a social sense unnamed (becoming Mrs. John Smith), anonymous except by function. To make a public self then, particularly an assertion of one in which the "I"

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[3] Far too many writers have discussed this issue to be credited here. I will mention only a few: Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, Hélène Cixous. Strong critical discussion of the subject appears in Alicia Suskin Ostriker's Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). Sidonie Smith's study makes an elaborate historical and psychoanalytic examination of this issue. Unfortunately, this text came into my hands too late to be thoroughly treated here. See A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987)

[4] For an account of the silencing at work in the publishing business see Joanna Russ, How to Suppress Women's Writing (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983). Of course, the fact that a great percentage of the world's illiterate are women must be understood as a more profound suppression.

appears, is to require a problematic conception (in writing and reading) of the person who as a female self says "I."[5]

Women writers have repeatedly observed that to assert an "I" is to engage in an act of resistance to the definition of "woman." When the woman writing "I" is a feminist, the act of resistance is compounded. The subject (here, both agent and topic) participates in what Teresa de Lauretis calls a "feminist concept of identity." This is her definition: "a political-personal strategy of survival and resistance that is also, at the same time, a critical practice and a mode of knowledge."[6] To generalize a feminist written self is to talk about a highly indeterminate presence. As de Lauretis's definition suggests, identity is valued as mobile and transformational, communal as well as private. Above all, the issue of identity is integral to the politics or ideology of feminism. There is no ideal feminist self. The particulars of race, sexual identity, class, and the necessary and desired articulations of these intersections and of the fluid relations of individuals and communities of women make even the notion of an ideal absurd.

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[5] Nicole Brossard in These Our Mothers Or: The Disintegrating Chapter says, "To write: I am a woman is heavy with consequences." Trans. Barbara Godard (Toronto: Coach House, 1983) 45.

[6] Teresa de Lauretis, "Issues, Terms, Contexts" in Feminist Studies/ Critical Studies, edited by Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 9.

The feminist "self," then, exists in the particulars of feminist texts and not in any particular kind of text. To speak of feminist writing of the self is necessarily to speak within and without the text. Like all writing, feminist writing of the self is informed by the experiences of the everyday, of the body, of the sites of contact with and isolation from the read and lived-in world. That world can only be imagined, felt, recognized from the writing. The forms of feminist autography are likely to be innovative, refusing given patterns of composition, and these widely varied, generically unbounded texts transform conventional ways of seeing the world and being selves in it. The written self is usually understood to be contained in autobiography, the self-told narrative of personal history, often chronological, of the experiences and concerns of the writer. This formal definition of genre in no way describes the area of my project. Nevertheless, considering some well-known theories of autobiography will provide a basis for understanding how "self" is conceived by those whose voices have been most influential in describing and inscribing it.

Georges Gusdorf establishes the generally accepted view of autobiography's development, its norms and assumptions, based on a civilization that believes it believes in "the singularity of each individual life."[7] The high humanism of

[7] Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, ed. James

this view ignores the forces that shape lives, "singularity" being visible and indivisible only if one need not see class, race, gender as determinants or informers of "each individual life." He does, however, notice that power has provided an essential spark, for Gusdorf ties the making of autobiography to the discovery or creation of history: "Henceforth, man knows himself a responsible agent: gatherer of men, of lands, of power . . . he alone adds consciousness to nature, leaving there the sign of his presence" (39).

The exclusive maleness of history, as Gusdorf rhetoricizes it, and the parallel male domain of autobiography are emphasized in Gusdorf's careful distinction between the private journal and the (public) autobiography. The private journal, long noted as a female medium, is flawed by its fragmentariness, its lack of continuity and of detachment, while "autobiography . . . requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time" (35). While Gusdorf is deeply conscious of the problematics of the mental life, he makes explicit his trust in the capacity of the "man" to know himself and communicate the knowledge along with the self: "[autobiography] is a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience

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Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 29. Subsequent references to this article will appear in the body of the thesis.

itself consciousness of it" (38). That a "life" here has become text, first experienced as read (imaged as a "first reading"), then rewritten, is integral to Gusdorf's view of autobiography: ". . . it recomposes and interprets a life in its totality" (p.38). Yet he believes that "the original sin of autobiography is first one of logical coherence and rationalization" (41). What is necessary to autobiography is also that which corrupts it--the selecting, shaping, and ordering of details of experience, feeling, thought. The contradiction here (the "original sin") is between the lived life and the written one. The lived life (unknowable) is wholly what it is, including its exclusions--its unconscious, refused and betrayed moments--and we may imagine that these absences affect and effect the experience of the life lived. Gusdorf's description ignores these blind spots which would continue to mark the autobiographer's interpretation of his experience, thus producing a double-blind, invisible to the writer (and reader) of his own life, no matter how earnest his wish for "totality," no matter how many pages he writes.

For Gusdorf the living and the writing come together in "the . . . drama of a man struggling to reassemble himself in his own likeness at a certain moment of his history" (43). The struggle changes a man, for "In becoming conscious of the past one alters the present" (47); yet he grasps for "a sense of truth as an expression of inmost

being" (43). This process of a man writing himself "as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been" leads Gusdorf to his "final analysis" about the autobiographer (46). He says, "There is never an end to this dialogue of a life with itself in search of its own absolute" (48). Gusdorf here enacts a double movement--he leaves the writer's process open (an "endless dialogue"), though presumably the book begins and ends the dialogue as far as the reader can be concerned, while sentencing the writer to a search for an absolute self, probably the "inmost being." If an "inmost" self exists, an "absolute", why must the dialogue never end? While asserting his sensitivity to the experience of the writer writing his life as he wishes it to be read (so far as he is able), Gusdorf is inevitably moved towards the transcendent visions that his faith in Truth and Self lead him to affirm. The "truth," the "absolute," the "destiny" that Gusdorf looks for in autobiography is the very "universal history" that Nietzsche claims is "his <u>own</u> history [as] the history of all humanity" (45).[8] The absolute, albeit ineffable and elusive, is the image of the European male in endless dialogue with himself in his search for himself, living out his destiny in the view that his life story is "universal history." And perhaps it is, to the degree that his shadow obliterates the existence, in writing at least (but not only), of other

[8] Gusdorf is quoting <u>The Gay Science</u>, sec. 337.

stories whose history does not carry the plot line of universality, truth, absoluteness and destiny.

This image of the European male is the central figure in James Olney's Metaphors of Self.[9] The self that concerns Olney is not merely the main character in the life-history-narrative that we generally think of as autobiography. In fact Olney eschews generic boundaries asserting that

> the final work [of a man], whether it be history or poetry, psychology or theology, political economy or natural science, whether it take the form of personal essay or controversial tract, of lyric poem or scientific treatise, will express and reflect its maker and will do so at every stage of his development (3).

Generic or formal matters are of far less interest to Olney than the internal/external relation of the "self" with its "oneness" whose "integrity or internal harmony [. . .] holds together the multiplicity and continual transformations of being" (6). Olney observes the perplexities of sameness within change (or change despite the continuity of identity), and poses a primary question: "if all selves are constantly evolving, transforming, and becoming different from themselves, then how is it at all possible to comprehend or define the self or to give anyone else any sense of it?" (29). His answer--Order!: "Order-produced and order producing, emotion-satisfying theories and equations--all the world views" (30)--by which he means

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[9] James Olney, Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). Subsequent references to this book will appear in the body of the thesis.

metaphors, in which self-awareness becomes a coherent vision of all reality.[10] The universalizing impulse appearing as "all reality" is accessible to the organizing vision of the autobiographer. "The individual," Olney says, "succeeds in making the universe take on his own order" (30). The security and power the metaphors bring him allow him to say, "This is my universe" (34).

Olney addresses the multiple registers of consciousness upon consciousness, and he is sensitive to the layers of points of view that give shape to the making of the large metaphors of self that interest him. But Olney, in 1972, does not acknowledge that two orders of being/ existence are at issue. One is lived experience, the other is made of words, the written self. The work indeed--that is, the writing--may be unified, coherent within its own terms. But for Olney and congruent with his tradition (which is also Gusdorf's tradition and that of the writers who interest him: Eliot, Yeats, Jung), this coherent structure carries the freight of all time and space: "The autobiographer [like the poet] who draws out of the flux of events a coherent pattern, or who creates a sufficient metaphor for experience, discovers in the particular, and reveals to us, the universal" (45). A significant destiny, a recognizable

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[10] We are reminded of Teresa de Lauretis's observation that "masters are made as we . . . accept their answers or their metaphors," in Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 3.

universality--these are the necessary components of a respectworthy written/autobiographical self.[11]

Apart from the obvious difficulties of the imperialist notions of universality, the gap in Olney's argument is that the unified and coherent written self does precisely other than speak the experienced self. Indeed the ordering metaphor distracts or distances the writer/reader from an accurate rendering of lived experience of selves becoming "different from themselves" (29). That is to say, when the writer's expression of self (necessarily metaphoric, because necessarily rescued from disorder, in Olney's schematization) is congruent with the expectation of the reader/critic, the mirror wish or the reflection of significant selves, universal selves, affirms the critic. A kind of closed circuitry is reinforced, one that is reflected in all the "universal history" of the Western tradition, which does indeed, as Olney suggests, take on "man's" own pattern. No hint that an excluded aspect might mar the universality of his image enters here. Within itself, the image is so multiple, so inexhaustibly self-reflecting, and self-modifying, that nothing is absent.

Olney seems, despite his perplexity about the changing self, not to have doubted the capacity of language to present/represent the self as the writer wished it presented. He sees language in its traditional role as a

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[11] For an extended view of "significant destiny" see Olney, Metaphors of Self, 48, 49.

"neutral agent of representation and communication," and the writer (Olney himself or his subjects) as "master of [his] discourse."[12] Indeed Olney's security within this frame is the basis of his flexible embrace of the range of forms the "metaphor of self" may take. That range is possible only because he asserts the refined, purified, elevated, symbolized, transcendent, self--the essential man as he appears in the work of art. While a background in neoplatonism and Christian doctrine helps a full appreciation of Olney's stance, it is not sufficient to clarify some of the assumptions present in his thought. He notes the existence of "consciousness, pure and simple, . . . referring to no objects outside itself, to no events, and to no other lives."[13] This, I believe, can be grasped only as a poetic statment, not as a descriptive statement about a piece of writing. These words about autobiography are, however, intended to describe: "we can understand it as participation in an absolute existence far transcending the shifting changing unrealities of mundane life."[14] The symbolic, even the mystical, dominates here. It is hard to resist the significance of life as Olney describes it.

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[12] Alice Jardine, Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985) 45. Jardine's sentence reads, "[This subject] has been master of its discourse, a Man."

[13] James Olney, "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Bios: The Ontology of Autobiography," in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 239.

[14] Olney, "Some Versions of Memory," 239.

The inescapable religiosity of his argument (he speaks of "what each of us was made for") makes a consideration of language as a merely human concern and self as a cultural, psychological, physical, even linguistic phenomenon, a sad comedown.[15]

The metaphoric self at the center of Olney's interest is the manifestation of an absolute, a participation in some transcendent significance. This is a profound distance from arguing as Eakin does that the deflated "self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure."[16] And it is a reality away from the post-modern sensibility described by Alice Jardine in which "[t]he notion of the 'self'. . . becomes absurd. It is not something called the self that speaks but language, the unconscious, the textuality of the text" (58). For Olney and Gusdorf, the life lived and the words written share a dimension of reality to the degree that a mystical force imbues each with the same significance. Each manifests the universal, the absolute, and the reader is a necessary participant in and reflection of that self-same universe.

Recent developments in psychoanalytic theory, post-structuralist interventions into linguistics, and a general

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[15] Olney, Metaphors of Self, 49.
[16] Paul John Eakin, Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 3. Subsequent references to this book will appear in the thesis.

upheaval in philosophical and literary studies have culminated in the "deconstruction" of the traditional assumptions about knowledge and language that informed autobiographical theory. One of deconstruction's intense interests is to question "the human being's control over the productions of language."[17] It is this questioning that lies at the center of the theoretical considerations of autobiography in essays by Michael Sprinker and Paul de Man. These writers posit mobile relations between consciousness, language and text that make the problematics of self-representation infinitely complex.

In "Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography," Michael Sprinker, using variations of Barthes, Foucault and Lacan, makes the text and the self metaphors for each other.[18] He asserts:

> Every text is an articulation of the relations between texts, a product of intertextuality, a weaving together of what has already been produced elsewhere in discontinuous form; every subject, every author, every self is the articulation of an intersubjectivity structured within and around the discourses available to it at any moment in time (325).

For Sprinker the political issues of what discourses are "available," what makes a discourse available, and to whom, are not interesting questions. He concentrates on

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[17] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Feminism and Critical Theory" in In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (New York and London: Methuen, 1987) 78.

[18] Michael Sprinker, "Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography," in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, ed. James Olney. Subsequent references to this article will appear in the body of the thesis.

redefining the self and establishing new boundaries of self, and in so doing fixes "self" again, this time not to a transcendent or mystical absolute, but to the power of articulation. Although Sprinker notes that "autobiography, the inquiry of the self into its own origin and history, is always circumscribed by the limiting conditions of writing, of the production of a text," the social or material (i.e., political) conditions of writing or text production do not concern him (342). The self, then, that autobiography articulates has been established as another kind of absolute presence--this time the universal does not elevate the self, but drives it inward, to the "elusive center of selfhood buried in the unconscious" (342). Sprinker concludes, "The origin and the end of autobiography converge in the very act of writing [. . .] for no autobiography can take place except within the boundaries of a writing where concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text" (342). Sprinker seems, peculiarly, to have re-established a "center" and then made the mapping of that unconscious locale of the "elusive center of selfhood" dependent on an exclusively (and explicitly) male model. This double re-inscription of a male-centered text leaves Sprinker's final assertion in a state of collapse he may not have intended.

The collapsing concept that he evokes, then relies on, to produce the autobiographical text is itself

conceptualized in a framework bounded by an unspoken (and/or unconscious) assumption of maleness. The sovereignty of selfhood that Sprinker claims to be dismantling is reasserted in the psychoanalytic paradigm he relies so securely upon. And the self in the life lived (in the body) and the self in the text are here again conflated. That is, the life in/of the body (as a particular historical, communal, racial, sexual, political being) is subsumed in the easy collapse of "concepts" that leaves conventional assumptions about those concepts veiled but fully inhabited by their creators--in the image of their creators.

Paul de Man's brief essay "Autobiography as De-facement" is more complex and more subtle.[19] He treats the problem of distinguishing between fiction and autobiography as simply "undecidable" (921). He says, "Autobiography . . . is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts" (921). But he goes on to argue that "The difficulties of generic definition that affect the study of autobiography repeat an inherent instability that undoes the model as soon as it is established" (922). "Inherent instability" is a characteristic of all (literary?) language; the image or, in de Man's words, "specular moment" is the "manifestation, on the level of the referent, of a linguistic structure" (922).

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[19] Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," MLN 94 (1979) 919-930. Subsequent references to this article will appear in the body of the thesis.

De Man insists always that we remember that writing is written, that images are organizations of language and not of a non-linguistic external existence, and that what we are experiencing in reading is the movement of language. He extends his explanation beyond textuality to "all cognitions": "The specular moment that is part of all understanding reveals the tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of self" (922). What is exposed (revealed?) by the "specular moment," by the moment of seeing, is precisely that the moment (the moment described or referred to) in question has NOT been seen in an unmediated way, but rather that an organizing principle of language has modified or displaced it. For de Man,

> [t]he interest of autobiography . . . is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge--it does not--but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions" (922).

I take this to mean that although autobiographical writing does indeed present a "self," that self must be understood to be a linguistic event bound by the inevitable constrictions of language and not a transcendent or absolute one. De Man suggests that the study of autobiography is caught in "the necessity to escape from the tropology of the subject and the equally inevitable reinscription of this necessity within a specular model of cognition" (923). In other words (although the phrasing here is ambiguous), the

subject, which is both agent and subject matter of autobiography, uses tropes and is also a product of tropological requirement. In his attempts to escape the movements of language of the subject, the writer about autobiography describes what he himself "sees" (understands) and thus reinscribes a language of figuration, instead of presenting the "truth." "Tropological substitution" is once again re-enacted, and as autobiographical writing is necessarily unfixed, writing about autobiographical writing must resist "totalization and closure".

De Man's argument is full of slippery phrasings and tricky vocabulary, and his closing comments on autobiography bear careful re-reading. He says,

> [t]o the extent that language is figure . . . it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute. Language, as trope, is always privative. . . . To the extent that, in writing, we are dependent on this language we all are . . . deaf and mute (930).

These statements are clearly self-limiting. There is little to argue with in the first of these sentences: unless we wonder to what extent language IS a figure. De Man, I believe, treats all language as such, and thus "as trope" language necessarily is privative, indicating negation or absence. My question comes with the last of the three assertions--to what extent are we dependent on this language (even) in writing? Unlike the deaf and mute Dalesman in the Wordsworth poem that de Man is using, we inform our reading

(and writing) with precisely the sensory/ specular experience that de Man (like Nietzsche) posits as the basis of knowledge, cognition, and understanding. Indeed the "thing itself" must be absent for the writing (and reading) to occur. The problematic word here is "dependent." To assert a total dependence on language is an act of "totalizing"--a habit of mind that de Man appears to reject. He teases us with the image of language as mute as a picture (which everyone knows speaks a thousand words) while hinting that the language is fixed--limited wholly to trope or figure--and thus enclosed within a system as monolithic or monumental as any mathematical or architectural model.

The pathos of language as de Man describes its functioning is irrefutable and irresistible; nevertheless, "the privative way of understanding" becomes too precise an equation of affirmation and negation (930). To the extent that language, as trope, is written and read, its meaning is in flux, and understanding (unstable as that sensation may be) participates in affirmation (presence/memory/fantasy) as well as in privation (absence/negation). Presumably that view is what is hidden behind de Man's final trope: "Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause" (930).

Although some aspects of this intensive notion of language and textuality are supported by the approach to the

relations of language to self and self to text that appears in Paul John Eakin's Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention, Eakin does not make expression a void. This study (one of the few authored by men that discusses women's writing) asserts the necessary presence of fictions and fiction-making as inevitable components of "life as lived" and as it is presented in writing (5). Rather than grappling with the epistemological difficulties of "truth" in representation of self, Eakin holds the view that "the self that is at the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (3) and thus that "in making the text the autobiographer creates a self that would not otherwise exist" (26). A clear distinction here exists between the life lived and the life written while the absolute boundary between fact and fiction is blurred. Once "fictions" are accepted as inevitable components of "truth," the authority of language as a shaper of reality is a given. But Eakin does not allow the written "self" to stand as a monument, shaped or fixed or composed of language alone.

Eakin sees "the relationship between self and language as [a] mutually constitutive interdependency" in which "the acquisition of language and the emergence of self-awareness" are interactive and parallel (8). Neither entity (self or language) is an independent phenomenon, and the written self has a status distinct from, though participating in, both

forces. With this understanding, autobiographical writing is seen to maintain a delicate and unstable movement of language in which memory, dream, desire, or consciousness at the time of writing interact with discursive or narrative structure. Eakin's study concentrates on the "dialectical interplay between the autobiographical impulse to self-invention and received models of selfhood in the surrounding culture" (6). Like the available discourses Sprinker mentions, "received models of selfhood" come from the private and the public contexts into which one is born.

Neither Sprinker nor Eakin, however, considers that the given images of what makes a "self" may include the autobiographical impulse. That is, "self-invention" may be a paradigm of "self" in western culture. For the woman writer, the "surrounding culture" (the available discourses of selfhood) has been male. The sense of self the woman writer has at any moment must be a mixture of those contradictory and shifting configurations of personhood in which to be a woman seems often not to be a person. When the woman writer is feminist, her interpretation of those configurations will inevitably refigure them and her "self." When "self" is written (whether that is understood to mean described, (re)presented, (re)created, articulated, or fixed), the distinction between the received models of selfhood and the "autobiographical impulse to self-invention" can again be brought into play, to be revised,

necessarily, in the next sentence. Most theorists of autobiographical writing trace the self, lived and written, from the perspective of and with their eyes upon male lives and men's writings.

The discussion of autobiographies written by women has just begun with the recovery of lost or ignored texts, and the approach has been (inevitably?) historical rather than critical for the most part. In general, comparisons of autobiographical styles of men and women describe and reinscribe a binary system. The male-authored texts, we are told by Estelle Jelinek in The Tradition of Women's Autobiography,[20] are written with "assurance and command" from "the privileged position of social, economic and political acceptance" (186) with emphasis on "professional, philosophical, or historical events" (xiii). Of women's autobiographies, Jelinek observes that "the emphasis remains on personal matters" (xiii) and "[i]n contrast to the self-confident, one-dimensional self-image that men usually project, women often depict a multidimensional, fragmented self-image colored by a sense of inadequacy and alienation" (xiii). The reductiveness of this view of male autobiographies parallels the serious overgenerality of her assertions about female writing. Moreover, she notes that "paradoxically" women "project self-confidence and a

[20] Estelle C. Jelinek, The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986) 187. Subsequent references to this book will appear in the body of the thesis.

positive sense of accomplishment" (xiii). Jelinek's own attitude seems paradoxical, for although she protests the values she finds in male autobiographies, she seems often to share them. Her explanation of the absence of or disregard for chronological order in women's autobiographies, for example, seems to convey considerable ambivalence about her material:

> They [women's autobiographies] may begin as chronological narratives, since chronology helps give a sense of order and control over one's life. But it is soon superseded--usually unconsciously--by interruptions to that safe progression with anecdotes, even out of order, and all kinds of insertions . . . . That has been women's autobiographical history from earliest times because chronological order does not seem to be sustainable in narratives with selves that are weak in focus, feel ambivalent, or are intent on portraying various and often conflicting roles (187-188).

While Jelinek's study is intent on modifying the canon, extending its limits and adjusting its norms, aims we can sympathize with, her interpretive strategies smell of apology for those very writers she has helped disinter.[21] Jelinek's approach is generic and comparative, but her study is uninformed by problematic issues of language and representation. Unfortunately, she keeps her grip on a fixed standard of "enduring literary value" (189) against which the autobiographies she discusses are measured; consequently, the approach taken in The Tradition of Women's

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[21] Opening the canon is also the focus of her earlier edited collection Women's Autobiographies: Essays in Criticism (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1980).

Autobiography can be of only limited value in attempts to trace the female written self.

Two other studies of women's autobiographies are also of interest. In The Female Autograph, Domna Stanton comes up with "autogynography" as her term for autobiographical writing by women. Tracing her topic historically and internationally in a brief theoretical essay, Stanton determines that "autogynography . . . had a global and essential therapeutic purpose: to constitute the female subject."[22] Playfully raising questions from various discursive contexts, Stanton wishes to conceive her topic from a "textual, nonreferential approach to the female subject" (16). Her deconstructive program requires her to grapple with the problem of the female signature (which engages her in discussion about the death of the author, the possibility of fraud, and the "non-presence of the subject" (15)), and allows her to conclude with a (satiric?) apology for exposing her "illogical belief that the gender of the author did make a difference, at this discursive point in time" (17). The contradictory position this leaves her in is appropriate to her interrogatory stance, but it offers no substantial insight into the female subject. The other, very recent, work of women's autobiography is Sidonie Smith's A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and

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[22] Domna C. Stanton, "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" in The Female Autograph, 14. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

the Fictions of Self-Representation.[23] As the title suggests, Smith's study is informed by contemporary issues in literary theory, in particular the dynamics of deconstruction, with its concern for marginality and the fictional dimension of autobiographical writing. Smith observes that "[w]omen who do not challenge those [patriarchal] gender ideologies and the boundaries they place around woman's proper life script, textual inscription, and speaking voice do not write autobiography" (44). Her concern is not women's writing of self in a broad sense, but the "relationship of gender to genre" as it has emerged in formal autobiography over five hundred years (19). Since my own concerns are not with autobiography as form, but with (feminist) ideas of selfhood that are manifested textually, Smith's subtle and complex study of the female self takes me on a related, tantalizing, but ultimately distracting, track. Of the twentieth-century woman autobiographer (only a small part of her discussion) Smith says, "[u]ltimately she may transform herself and cultural stories generally by shifting generic boundaries so that there is neither margin nor center. . . . Having untied her relationship to the conventions of the autobiographical contract from the idea of an atomized, individualistic, central self . . . she effectively subverts the patricarchal

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[23] Sidonie Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, 1987. Subsequent references will appear in the text. (See footnote 3, chapter one.)

order itself" (59). Clearly, Smith sees the female writing self and the feminist writing self as having a common project.

The track of the (male) concept of self moves from a glorious transcendence to the defaced, muted, deaf being made and unmade in the rhetorical gesture of autobiography. The polarity of Western thought produces the extremity of these two notions of selfhood: a supernova creates a black hole. If the exalted self of universal significance does not exist then its inverse must, a no-self, no presence, no face. Once again, "self," as a written phenomenon at least, has been reconstructed according to a male model. The rhetoric of deconstruction, anti-humanism (or post-humanism), argues a profound shift in the organization of the nature of reality (that is of the perception/inscription of reality), including the nature of selfhood. Yet, "Man," the very idea of which embodies the male right to define humanity, is secure in its claim to articulate selfhood, whether that is conceived of as "essence" or as a linguistic construct.

One area of resistance to the univocal re-inscription of reality by men has been the intense writing of feminists trained in psychoanalysis who refuse to accept a male dominated psychoanalytic model for female existence.[24] This writing that has gained enormous attention in (academic?)

[24] The writings of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous are those most often thought of in this context.

feminist contexts is l'écriture féminine, or writing "in the feminine."[25] This complicated form of literary expression is not necessarily writing by or of women, but is the articulation of the inarticulable "Other."[26] A psychoanalytic construct, the "Other" is that which is not the (conscious) self. Variously thought of as the unconscious (Freud), the denied (Irigaray), the repressed (Lacan), the pre-symbolic, or pre-linguistic (Kristeva), it has gained extraordinary status as a metaphor for whatever disrupts a uniform presence or presentation, or at least can be interpreted as a disruption or rejected aspect of authority.[27] Toril Moi suggests that l'écriture féminine,

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[25] My discussion of l'écriture féminine has been influenced by various writings including the following: Ann Rosalind Jones in "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Ecriture Féminine" in The New Feminist Criticism, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 361-377; Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London and New York: Methuen, 1985); Jane Gallop, The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982); Shirley Neuman, "Importing Difference" in A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing, eds. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: Longspoon/NeWest, 1986) 392-405.

[26] Indeed, some males are said to write "in the feminine." A woman writer who seems to be clear or energetic or forceful was often said to "write like a man"--losing her existence as female, while men who write "in the feminine" (James Joyce, for example) lose nothing of their maleness or their status as respected writers and gain from being said to have special insight into "the female."

[27] Julia Kristeva is well known for her distinction between the "semiotic" and "symbolic" stages of infant development. In the semiotic stage the "pre-oedipal" child, identified with the mother, makes "vocalizations" that are "undifferentiated as signifiers" and are later manifested as "poetic" discourse--rhythm, disruption of grammar, etc. The "symbolic" stage occurs when the child splits from mother and enters symbolic language in which "meaning, sign, and the signified object" manifest the Oedipal identification

because it disrupts the smooth surface of unity, sameness, rationality, objectivity, grammar and disrupts binary rigidities (the uniforms of phallogocentrism), necessarily affirms a feminist aim.[28] As it is embodied in the pre-symbolic zone, l'écriture féminine is often spoken of as "writing the body." Hélène Cixous says, "Women must write through their bodies."[29] She breaks the grip of (male) reason on writing, insisting that "women are body. More body, hence more writing" (257). The analogy of "excess" (that is, beyond usefulness to male purposes) is relied on here. The female body is fetishized in its site of specific orgasmic pleasure (jouissance) and excess comes to be representative of all expression of female pleasure, all female writing.[30] Because the female body has so often

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with the father and his laws. See Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, ed. Leon S. Roudiez and translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 133-134. The "semiotic" stage is often referred to as the "(m)other tongue." The "Other" is necessarily a "feminine" presence and the "subject" that emerges through the endless discourse that constitutes life (or the psychic life at least) must necessarily be male--otherwise, whence "Otherness?" See Luce Irigaray, "Any Theory of the 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by the 'Masculine'"in Speculum of the Other Woman, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) 133-146.

[28] Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 104. Though Moi is speaking about Cixous specifically, her argument is textual, and I believe this supports her position.

[29] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in New French Feminisms: An Anthology, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Coutivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1980) 256.

[30] See Spivak's discussion of "the suppression of the clitoris . . . as the suppression of the woman-in-excess" in "French Feminism in an International Frame" in In Other

been the object of male discourse, l'écriture féminine has the great appeal of seeming to be the voice of the female body speaking itself as subject. The delight of flaunting bodies so long un/covered in men's-only scripts is intense.

But despite the pleasure for the writer or the reader, and it is full of that, l'écriture féminine cannot provide this thesis with a sufficiently complex approach to the question of the written self in a feminist context. Perhaps ironically, given the French obsession with "difference," the erasure or negation of differences among women is the great weakness of l'écriture féminine. The female body (in abstraction) is, once again, reconstructed as an absolute, defined by women, yes, but women who appear to have taken on the habits of mind of universalising, generalizing, essentializing experience. Luce Irigary, for example, makes a general assertion about the connection between the body and "woman"'s relation to language: "In her statements--at least when she dares to speak out--woman retouches herself constantly. She just barely separates from herself some chatter, and exclamation, a half-secret, a sentence left in suspense--when she returns to it, it is only to set out again from another point of pleasure or pain."[31] Or observe, in a different kind of universalizing,

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Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (New York and London: Methuen, 1987) 152.

[31] Luce Irigaray, "This sex which is not one," trans. Claudia Reeder in New French Feminisms, 103.

the unfortunate appropriations of racial and sexual experience in Cixous' "Laugh:" "we the repressed of our culture . . . we are black and we are beautiful" (248), and "[w]e are all Lesbians" (252). To write "the body" is, once more, to take women out of history, out of economics, class, race--that is, out of either the specific and particular experience of self or the discourse of the surrounding culture.

In l'écriture féminine, the body is inevitably "Female," a concept accessible to the text of anyone's pleasure and resistant to reclamation or recuperation by women of their particular bodies. The body's specific memories can translate into the politics of female historicity and culture as writing only if the specificity of individual and cultural experience is acknowledged. To accept the existence of the (m)other tongue (that is, the usefulness of the construct as descriptive of human development) is to re-inscribe a circle around ourselves. That is, to designate language as naturally territorial according to gender assumes that male/female distinctions are already (and always?) known. Accepting the division of language into a category known as "feminine" reinscribes an essential but not biological sexual difference. Designating a particular kind of writing as somewhow inherently "feminine" (albeit available to men) can serve only to reiterate heteropatriarchical divisions and consequently to

obscure the feminist project of dismantling those divisions.[32]

This chapter has outlined various contemporary concepts of the self: transcendent, monumental, symbolic, essential, disembodied, absent; self as an outgrown ideological skin containing humanist unself-consciousnesses, or as the wishful potential of an idealized unified being. While variations on these configurations do appear in women's writing of self, most often in feminist texts the "self" is provisional, an exploration of possibility and a tentative grammar of transformations. Since the available conceptions have been so profoundly unsatisfactory (from feminists' points of view), feminist autography inscribes a "new" discourse, one of extraordinary complexity and fluidity. Rather than treating "self" as a fixed notion, clearly conceptualized and needing only to be "expressed," the feminist writer of self engages in a (community of) discourse of which she is both product and producer.

The interrelation of self and community is one of the most problematic issues in the writing of feminist self. Political or ideological consciousness takes into account the intersections of individual experience in all its complexities of race, sexuality, class, ethnicity. The creation of new discourses separate from those of the

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[32] Julia Penelope, "Heteropatriarchal Semantics: Just Two Kinds of People in the World," in Lesbian Ethics (Vol. 2, no. 1, Fall 1986) 58-80.

dominant ideologies, (white, male, institutionalized) is part of the process of the feminist self, lived and written. The feminist writing of self, then, is part of creating/ and is the creation of new communities. Transformation of self becomes a social transformation. Once again: as women write themselves they write the movement. The transformations of self, of community and of material reality are brought to possibility in the writing.

The movements of self (selves?), of writing(s), and of communities are registered in this writing. This thesis will participate in that movement, reading (from the outside as Canadian, from the inside as feminist) the writing of self by contemporary United States feminists. The second chapter discusses theoretical issues of female subjecthood then illustrates the textual strategies by which female subjectivity is precisely articulated in Audre Lorde's The Cancer Journals. The third chapter considers the ideological and ethical poetics of self in the most recent prose and poetry of Adrienne Rich. Chapter four tracks Kate Millett's permeable boundaries of self as they appear in the blurred boundries of genre in The Basement: Meditations on a Human Sacrifice. The last chapter looks to Wendy Rose, Leslie Marmon Silko, Cherrie Moraga, and Chrystos in a variety of pieces for a writing of self that makes explicit the reclamation of complex communities of identity.

As each writer traces and recombines the discursive boundaries of her identity, the thesis illustrates the impossibility of imposing a metadiscourse on the feminist writing of self.[33]

[33] The term "discursive boundaries" comes from de Lauretis, Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, 8.

Chapter Two: The Feminist Subject and the Asymmetrical Self

The previous chapter discussed some significant paradigms of self held by theorists of autobiography: most theorists, whatever their constructions, seem to suggest that the paradigm they establish is adequate as a representative of universal truth about self-hood, wherever the (male?) self appears.[1] Others, informed by psychoanalytic and linguistic perspectives, dispute the existence of a "self" as essential, universal, knowable. For them the mutability and unpredictability of exchange between the conscious and unconscious processes of mind undermine any reliable claim to "identity." Development of a sense of self rests on the symbolic system, and language is understood to create self, making "self" a linguistic gesture, nothing more than a complex and highly mobile trope. Indeed, it has been argued that "[t]he subject who speaks is composed of language itself."[2] Both the subject (self) and representation (or self-representation) are undone in this deconstruction of systems of belief. Paradoxically this becomes another kind of universal truth.[3]

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[1] James Olney's discussion of African autobiographers is a demonstration of this rather direct overlay of European cultural norms onto African identity. See Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

[2] Jardine, Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 107.

[3] This view lends itself to the socialist reading of the role ideology plays in the construction of a subjectivity

For students of modernism, these disruptions of what is often referred to as phallogocentric thought have long been familiar: the dislocation of writing from "reality" or signifier from signified is a given. Words have been demonstrated to be unstable, and "realism" exposed as a highly contrived literary or narrative form, not in any necessary way congruent with "reality" or life. But despite modern fiction's explorations of the arbitrariness of language and of "[m]an's non-coincidence-with-himself," "[m]an's rational control over himself, his language, and his actions is still assumed to be possible--and desirable."[4] Alice Jardine discusses the dismantling of that "traditional concept[s] of the self" (121) through challenges to language's power to "represent." The following is a summary of Jardine's description of

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whose primary aim is "to represent and reproduce the myths and beliefs necessary to enable people to work within the existing social formation." Catherine Belsey, "Constructing the subject: deconstructing the text," in Feminist Criticsm and Social Change, eds. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York and London: Methuen, 1985) 46. Indeed, only the very recent socialist-feminist writing seems to be modifying the view that self or identity is the entire construction of "bourgeois ideology." However, since United States feminist writing seems to resist formal socialist models of analysis, I will record my interest in socialist-feminist projects and retreat from their particular paradigm. I have found these articles informative: Cora Kaplan, "Pandora's box: subjectivity, class and sexuality in socialist feminist criticism," in Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism, eds. Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn (London and New York: Methuen, 1985) 146-176; Sheila Rowbotham, "The Women's Movement and Organizing for Socialism," in Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism, eds. Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, and Hilary Wainwright (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981) 21-155.

[4] Jardine, Gynesis, 106.

contemporary theory's deconstruction of humanist views of identity: traditionally, the "ego" (of the Cartesian self) is the basis of "identity," and "identity" carries the dual charge of "self" and sameness (107).[5] Within the logic of language (a system of differences), identity posits otherness, for sameness requires difference to be recognizable. Here the "subject acquires its position [as subject] through cognition"(45), inevitably dependent upon language. That is, one must be able to <u>say</u> "I am." Congruent with (and contingent upon?) the assertions of self-hood (<u>cogito</u>) is the model of knowledge in which "'certainty' is located in the ego--as 'predator of the Other'" (106). Certainty, then, centered in the ego, asserts presence. Presence and absence are necessary to each other in the binary system, and it is upon that binary that mimesis rests. Representation, replacing or making present that which is absent, functions as that which everyone (already) knows (134). Humanist conceptions of identity and of representation both require that <u>uncertainty</u> be suppressed.

Jardine's discussion outlines the deconstructions of this "humanist self" (105) and the authority of representation it rests upon, and then turns her dazzling feminist light on those valorizations of fragmentation and alienation that characterize the deconstructed self and the

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[5] The ego is supposedly ungendered, which is to say, the human norm--male.

undermined possibility of representation. She observes the obsessive[6] "voiding" of the person (106) and looks warily at the valorization of "man's seemingly hopeless alienation from his "'self'" (106) attributed to the foreign language of his unconscious: the "mother tongue." The internalized (m)other makes a sense of oneness--with self--impossible (for man). Jardine casts the designation of "mother tongue" into doubt: she says, slyly, "It would seem, in fact, to be the mother who has the language, the maternal tongue, necessary for all these writers in modernity; or at least that language which according to Lacan escapes the self, the Cartesian ego--the lalangue of literature" (116, my emphasis).[7] She cites the case of Louis Wolfson whose abhorrence of his mother's presence and voice caused him to construct a labyrinthian secret language involving "cutting up his maternal tongue in a mysterious and sophisticated way" (116).[8] What interests Jardine is the French

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[6] "Obsessive" is my word, not hers. Jardine uses "paranoiac" (117).

[7] "lalangue": what women speak, the language of the unconscious, of the id. See Jonathan Culler's discussion of langue as linguistic system in On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982) 96-99; and Shirley Neuman's discussion of feminist free play with the term in "Importing Difference," in A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing, eds. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: Longspoon/NeWest, 1986) 395-397.

[8] See Roland Barthes, "The writer is someone who plays with his mother's body . . . in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or in order to dismember it, to take it to the limit of what can be known about the body; I would go so far as to take bliss in a disfiguration of the language, and opinion will strenuously object since it opposes 'disfiguring

theorists' view of Wolfson as "exemplary of modernity's rejection of the Cartesian subject, the sign, and representation." Jardine suggests that the feminist critic must be sensitive to the creation of and cutting up of the maternal voice as (possibly) at the heart (ear) of these "positivities of alienation" (116-117). The feminist critic must conclude that the male writers of modernity or deconstruction rely on their fantasies/wishes/fears of the "feminine"[9] to "subvert[s] the Subject, Representation, and Truth" (168-9).

The "new" conceptions of representation and the speaking subject sought after by contemporary theorists thus leave the female/feminist reader in a familiar place: as a function in a male fantasy about a male self. But ignoring the questions raised is clearly no answer for feminist readers, especially since feminist practice has long been recognized as making its way to the place of greatest anxiety. Teresa de Lauretis confronts this authoritative view directly. She reminds herself, and us, that language "need not be thought of as belonging to anyone" and "argument," "confrontation," "struggle," and "intervention" are part of refusing to "accept their

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nature.'" The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 37.

[9] The construction of the "feminine" has little if anything to do with women as subjects or agents of language. In Teresa de Lauretis's description she [woman] is "the empty space between the signs." Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 8.

answers."[10] Moreover, many of the deconstructive strategies and disoveries (I refer to the challenge to given, obvious, self-evident "truths") are familiar to feminist thinkers and have always been part of feminist theoretical practice.[11] The decision to engage in the current critical debates/discourse allows a double (at least) gesture for feminists, in that "engage" here means both take on and resist. To speak at all as subjects is to resist "the feminine": that is, for women to speak as subjects subverts the view that it is the idea of the "feminine" that subverts male surfaces. The usefulness of the "feminine" is entirely within a masculinist context in which women are irrelevant. Women are, however, relevant to ourselves. Having never conceived the Subject, Representation or Truth as our own, we need not take on the implications of bearing them. Jardine, and others, defy the necessary alienation of self from self, proposing a female subject that is not bound (or boundaried) by the masculinist discourse on subject-hood.

Alice Jardine's most provocative question, for the feminist reader, is this: "What is the potential for articulating new feminist fictions, both theoretical and other, formed by the necessity for women as subjects to remain active in and attentive to the signifying practices of our times" (40). She suggests a tentative answer,

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[10] de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't, 4.

[11] This may be a circular assertion since to be a feminist at all is to challenge the obvious and self-evident inferiority of women.

"Feminist critics . . . have reemphasized . . . insistence on the female character as the only space for a potentially new kind of subjecthood" (175). By "female character" we read both a fictional construct and the intentionally auto-graphical written self; being a feminist makes one sensitive to the "signifying practices of our times" though the articulations may not always be framed in the current language of linguistics and philosophy. Indeed, from the earliest (contemporary) feminist theory, attention to language and its implications for female subjectivity has paralleled other necessary attentions.[12]

To raise and affirm the need for a way to talk about female subjectivity is to resist the conclusions of male theorists of deconstruction and to refuse the male scenario which places "woman" "beyond representation, beyond selfhood."[13] Nancy K. Miller, for example, believes that the "current trend toward the massive deconstitution of subjectivity" ignores the issues of female authorship.[14]

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[12] For example, see Mary Daly, "This method of liberation . . . involves a castrating of language." Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) 8-9; or Kate Millett, "language . . . reserve[s] the human condition for the male." Sexual Politics (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969) 76.

[13] Luce Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, 1974, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985) 22.

[14] Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," in Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, edited by Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 103. Subsequent references to this article will appear in the text.

Suppressing the question of "writing identity"[15] denies that authorship "is irreducibly complicated by the historical, political, and figurative body of the woman writer" (107). Because women have not been constituted as subject in the public context, to assume that their relationship to authorship, or text, can be subsumed under a common banner with male writers within "the poststructuralist epistemologies of the subject and the text" (105) is to recreate the absence of subjectivity yet again. While Miller wishes to see feminist writers overcome their anxiety about "claiming theoretically what we know experientially (. . . our life in discourse)" (115), she is wary of a "poetics of transparence--writing directly from one's own experience"--fearing a "prescriptive esthetics, a 'politically correct' program of representation" (110-111).[16] Miller does not seem to take into account the unwieldiness of available discourses, however, and the persistence with which women writers have resisted them.[17]

A transformation of language seems necessary to make it "fit" women's experience. "Our life in discourse" seems to

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[15] Miller says this is an aspect of the "(new) monolith of anonymous textuality" (104).

[16] Miller here is addressing the demand made by some Black feminist critics that Black female writers provide admirable (not crazy, promiscuous or lesbian) female characters. See Sondra O'Neale's "Inhibiting Midwives, Usurping Creators: The Struggling Emergence of Black Women in American Fiction," in Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, 139-156.

[17] Patricia Yaeger's Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Stategies in Women's Writing (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) begins to define "a countertradition within women's writing . . . in which women find language empowering" (3).

require a subtlety that "transparence" or directness (were they achievable) could not provide. This is not to say that some feminist writing does not attempt to fix, contain the tensions the feminist theorist feels between the "ethics of wholeness" (110) and the "[d]ispersion and fragmentation" required by "[the] critical styles of desire and deconstruction" (111). Dissipating these tensions is not in our interest, and Miller suggests that "any definition of the female writing subject, not universalized as Woman, . . . acknowlege[] our ongoing contradictions, the gap, and the (perhaps permanent) internal split that makes a collective identity or integrity only a horizon, but a necessary one" (116-117). She claims a movement of resistance (against Woman) and of production that will allow us to "find language [. . .] as a woman" and thus constitute a new "social subject" (117).[18]

That feminist critics are so deeply defensive about the existence of female subjectivity suggests some trauma, not about the fact of existence but about the right to exist, to speak.[19] Hélène Cixous's well-known description of the violent distress of the woman speaking ("She doesn't 'speak,' she throws her trembling body in the air, she lets

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[18] Miller credits the phrase "social subject" to Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't, 186.

[19] Miller suggests that the female "subject" may be seen as a "working metaphor" (107). Can we/she not be more or other than that?

herself go . . ." etc.)[20] is of particular interest for the issue of female subjectivity and for the female writing self. Cixous makes the link that deconstructive theorists (Derrida, for example, or Barthes) deny has validity--of "writing and voice" (Cixous's emphasis). This connection is a complex one--and in the context of contemporary theory, the desire to dislocate writing from "voice" has become the dismantling of "phallogocentrism." Voice means presence, presence means origin and origin implies Logos/The Word, the Godhead, the authority of Truth etc.--the source and substance of power.[21] What Cixous's "privilege of voice"[22] exposes is that the practice of writing takes women to self, to body, to presence, and rejects the "transcendental anonymity" of writing/language detached from the context of its production.[23] Only if "voice" or "presence" is assumed to be that of the most profound of authorities, indeed, a voice or presence not limited by social or political conditions, is it necessary to detach it

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[20] Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, The Newly Born Woman, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 93.

[21] See especially Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 278-280.

[22] The Newly Born Woman, Cixous' emphasis, 92.

[23] This generalization about the woman writer could (and should) also be made about the male writer. All are privileged in the same way. Conversely, writers of both sexes argue that "writing transcends sexual identity" (Miller, 107). This is a disagreement that we cannot solve. The resolution depends on a shared understanding, that is to say, ideology.

from writing. Derrida himself notes, "The 'subject' of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author."[24] And if we mean by female writing "subject" a complex, multiple, mutable (and self-consciously so) voice, a self for whom "sovereignty" is not only a foreign image, but also a distasteful one, then that 'subject' exists, and not in solitude.

Clearly the question of subject-hood is conflicted by the ideal of a unified self and the valorization of the fragmented self. When feminists consider the issue, however, the dichotomy, as usual, is shown to be inadequate. Mary Ann Caws offers one enriching complication in her discussion of the fragmentation of the female body in surrealist visual art.[25] Hoping to find "an integration of ourselves" in women's "embodiments of our imaginations, our desires, and our truths" (285), Caws situates integration between the alternatives of totalization ("a masterly concept") and fragmentation, which for women too often suggests dismemberment. Integration, in Caws's view, is a communal development, and part of the processes of transformation that make the female subject "the very speaking core of our interpretive community."[26] In contrast

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[24] Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in Writing and Difference, 226.

[25] Mary Ann Caws, "Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art," in The Female Body in Western Culture, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1985) 262-286.

[26] Caws attributes the phrase "interpretive community" to Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class: A Theory of

to the sense of self put forward by Roland Barthes,[27] in which fragmentation is not only inevitable but desirable, women have not "felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, and Cogito, etc." and thus have less investment in dismantling self.[28] Indeed Adrienne Rich says, "I write for the still-fragmented parts in me, trying to bring them together."[29]

Caws's desire for integration and Rich's wish to bring parts of herself together participate in the "ethics of wholeness" that seeks an alternative both to the suppression of difference that totalization implies and to the divisions of self against self suggested by fragmentation. Much writing of this desire is precise, specific, personal. But another aspect of it has played a significant part in the discourse of contemporary feminism. I call it the Rhetoric of Self. Often the writing of this feminist Self is celebratory, affirmative, and exhoratory. Here is one of the best examples of it:

> Feminists are positing an original, wild, radical wholeness in the Self which is constantly unfolding. This whole self has certainly been subjected to violent, oppressive, forced splitting. . . . we seek to heal the splits and dismemberments of patriarchy through our intuition of an original wholeness. . . . [. . .] Feminism is the articulated urge to lay claim to a larger, active, holistic view of ourSelves. It is

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Interpretive Communities (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983) 285.

[27] Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 93-94.

[28] Miller, 106; see also Paul Jay, Being in the Text (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984) 38.

[29] Quoted in Miller, 109-110. The original source is Rich's "Blood Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet," Massachusetts Review (1984) 540.

> at once our starting point and our goal. . . . the oppression [is not] the primary constitution of a woman's Self. Indeed, the oppressive conditions are a shock, a weight, a drain, precisely because they are a shock to something, a weight on something, a drain of something. That something is a sense of integrity of Self, a Self that may only or mostly exist as potential. . . . Radical feminism speaks to the deep Self in women. [30]

This abstracted, generalized, universalized (but not essentialized--it may exist only as "potential") Self is rhetoricized as primary presence and rightful goal, as precious possession and object of desire. It has been influential as source and substance of feminist energy. Not the least of the rhetoricized Self's potentialities is that it can be re-articulated as a "subject" whose aim is to heal the "Self-splitting" that is inevitable with the ideological imposition of a psychoanalytic model of development which requires a gap between the "pre-Oedipal" and "Oedipal" phases of relationship to the "symbolic." In this model's necessary division of an individual into Self and Other, the female is necessarily Other and hence women are left without access to ANY self.[31] Mary Daly twists this masculinist model to assert woman's "ontological intuition of her Otherness in relation to all of the shapes

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[30] Emily Erwin Culpepper, "Simone de Beauvoir and the Revolt of the Symbols," in Trivia: A Journal of Ideas (no. 6. Winter, 1985) 11-12.

[31] "Self-splitting" is Mary Daly's expression. See Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) 18.

imposed on her."[32] That is, this feminist rhetoric of Self participates in the discourse of the Other, rejecting, as do all feminists, the silence that discourse offers. It refuses and refutes Jacques Lacan's (hopeful?) belief that "she [Woman] does not correspond to a self-in-language."[33]

The rhetoric of the Self of inspirational feminist writing bears a peculiar relationship to the writing of self that concerns us here. While it is too general, too enthusiastic, to constitute autography, it does make a double gesture that is useful for the feminist written self, and which finds its way into that discourse. It simultaneously affirms the possibility of existence and the value of each individual female self, and it gathers all women into the embrace of that vision. It allows and requires the transformation of each woman into the "new social subject" without prescribing the nature of that phenomenon. The heated rhetoric of Selfness, then, engages in the evolution of personal and political subjecthood. Our interest is the written self, the transformations of the textual self, and the personal and political body of the writer. It is in the text that the self (or selves) of women perform and articulate those transformations. The idea of self is necessarily problematic--the self exists (it

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[32] Mary Daly, Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 325.

[33] Jardine is discussing Lacan's assertion that "there is always something about and in her which escapes discourse," in Seminaire II (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1978) 34. Quoted in Gynesis, 165.

must for transformation to occur); yet the reclamation, and articulation, of self are understood to be part of the process of making something new, but unfixed, come into being. And all aspects of this transformation are understood to be part of a force for social change.

As a revolutionary concept, and as a feminist principle, "transformation" is widely embraced: Julia Kristeva: "no socio-political transformation is possible which does not constitute a transformation of subjects";[34] Catherine Belsey: "in the fact that the subject is a process lies the possibility of transformation";[35] Gayatri Spivak (referring to "the best of French feminism"): "[it is] against sexism, where women unite as a biologically oppressed caste; and for feminism, where human beings train to prepare for a transformation of consciousness."[36] Transformation enters the discussion of writing the self in that it is the site (though it can be fixed in neither time nor space) of the mutable self engaging with language in the context of social resistence. Jacques Derrida addresses the peculiarity of the mutable self in his discussion of

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[34] Julia Kristeva, Polylogue (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977) 523, quoted by Domna C. Stanton in "Language and Revolution: The Franco-American Dis-Connection," in The Future of Difference, eds. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1980) 74.

[35] [her emphasis] "Constructing the subject: deconstructing the text," in Feminist Criticsm and Social Change, 1985, 50.

[36] "French Feminism in an International Frame", in In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (New York and London: Methuen, 1987) 144.

autobiography: "But when you say he writes himself, you seem to assume that he already has his identity, that he is already himself."[37] Derrida's comment points to the change that occurs in the process of writing: the self that writes the self is modified in the process of writing. When this multiple transformation includes the intention to effect social/cultural/political change, as an aspect of writing the self, the feminist gesture of autography is quickened.

It is against the background of transformation that I wish to set my discussion of Audre Lorde. Her writing of self is both the account of a transformation of her body and her sense of self, and the reconstruction, textually, of a self. This reading of Lorde's book accepts Alicia Ostriker's view that in the writing of many contemporary American women poets the "academic distinctions between the self and what we in the classroom call the 'persona' move to vanishing point." Ostriker goes on to explain, "When a woman poet today says 'I,' she is likely to mean herself, as intensely as her imagination and her verbal skills permit."[38] While Ostriker does not problematize the "self" that the contemporary poet is speaking, her distinction between the female self and the distanced and depersonalized

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[37] Jacques Derrida, The Ear of the Other (New York: Schocken Books, 1985; first published Montreal: VLB Editeur, 1982) 88.

[38] Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 12.

masks of the "I" as a conventionally and intentionally distanced narrative voice speaks directly to the feminist "I." Whom the writer means when she says "I" is what this reading of Audre Lorde's Cancer Journals will explore.

In 1978, Audre Lorde, Black lesbian feminist writer, had her right breast removed because of cancer. The Cancer Journals,[39] published in 1980, is her writing of that experience and of her present understanding of it. It is a slim volume comprised of personal exposition, a speech, narrative-essays, and a selection of dated journal entries, embedded in and set off from the main text in italics. The writing of this text exemplifies Ostriker's view that "when defining a personal identity women tend to begin with their bodies."[40] Lorde's surgery left her with the realization that, in her words, "I am who the world and I have never seen before" (48). Lorde's discovery of an unfamiliar external and internal reality is a manifestation of the physical change of amputation: a changed body means both a changed relationship with the world and a changed self. Her sense of personal identity is consistently questioned in her writing, and its variations are a consistent issue here.

In the period of decision before surgery Lorde describes the "concert of voices" inside herself. She understands the discordant "voices" as "those myriad pieces

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[39] Audre Lorde, The Cancer Journals (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1980). Subsequent references to this book will appear in the text.

[40] Ostriker, Stealing the Language, 11.

of myself and my background I had fought so long and hard to nourish and maintain" (31). These "pieces of self" do not function as a unified, coherent, whole. The multitude is full of contradictions: "a thin high voice was screaming that none of this was true" (30); another detached itself and provided a cool commentary; yet another demanded sleep (30). Lorde does not distinguish how she identifies an "I" who listens to the many voices of her selves, but certain entries from the journal of the time reveal that no central "I" separate from the other parts of self maintained a consistent presence, a control. Recounting her decision to have a mastectomy, Lorde says, "I would have paid even more than my beloved breast . . . to preserve that self that was not merely physically defined" (32). Yet the surgery, as the journal entry at the time shows, is modifying that very self: "I want to write of the pain I am feeling right now, of the lukewarm tears that will not stop coming into my eyes--for what? For my lost breast? For the lost me? And which me was that again anyway? . . . I want to be the person I used to be, the real me" (October 10, 1978. 24-25). Lorde struggles to accept all the "me's"--even the ones that contradict her belief that one self is as "real" as another.

Lorde encourages a multiplicity of selves, and the spirals of selves (Black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet) that touch, meet, cross, and blur according to context must all be given voice. These "selves" could be considered

"discourses": that is, they could be the complex of what one says about one's Blackness, for example--how it means; how it is interpreted/understood/ experienced. But seen as "discourse" the self loses its link to the body, to the self indicated but not (or not yet) written. It (discourse) has an aridity about it, and to choose it as the dominant metaphor or figure for writing about this writing is to disfigure Lorde's written self, which she keeps so closely allied with her physical self.[41]

The day after the stitches were removed she wrote,

> . . . the act of writing seems impossible to me sometimes, the space of time for the words to form or be written is long enough for the situation to totally alter, leaving you liar or at search once again for the truth. What seems impossible is made real/tangible by the physical form of my brown arm moving across the page; not that my arm cannot do it, but that something holds it away. (October 5, 1978. 52)

Here the physical act of writing parallels the emotional/ psychological impossibility of expression. The immobility of Lorde's brown arm represents for her the slipperiness of her understanding. As an aspect of her responsibility to her "own selves," Lorde resists conclusion, waiting to understand, she says, "how I feel to my selves" (65). No particular voice seems to come forward with a truth that holds steadily for this time, and the traumatized selves resist language: "There is so much I have not said in the

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[41] To think of Audre Lorde as "disfigured" by her mastectomy may be inevitable, but if this text works as I believe it does, she can been seen in a new and positive configuration of self-hood.

past few days, that can only be lived now--" (October 5, 1978. 52). What is too elusive or inchoate to be spoken in the moment (in the journal) is returned to and given account of in the writing that lies alongside the italicized entries. Lorde explains, "I am writing this now in a new year, recalling, trying to piece together that chunk of my recent past, so that I, or anyone else in need or desire, can dip into it at will if necessary to find the ingredients with which to build a wider construct. This is an important function of telling experience" (53). Lorde circles round these explanations, approaching from different perspectives at different times (here she is both reader and writer of her own text).

But always the writing implies that the written self is the known self: this text suggests that for her the writing is a necessary part of the living of her self. In part this is an aspect of her political life--the making of a community through transforming what is usually seen as private experience into a public matter. Her own, individual, concerns are of equal importance to her, and she goes on, "I am also writing to sort out for myself who I was and was becoming throughout that time" (53). The previous selves (here in the journal entries as well as in the memories) come into play with the present writing self. Lorde's insistent drawing of attention to the fact of writing/the act of writing--whether in the past or at the

moment--layers this text, and allows Lorde terrific flexibility. Within a page, she includes details of memory: "I would sleep for a few hours and then I would get up, go to the john, write down my dreams on little scraps of paper without my glasses . . ." (52); rational thoughts: "I'd remember that we have always been temporary" (52); a journal entry (always dated and italicized, clearly an interpolated text): "I feel like I'm counting my days in milliseconds" (October 5, 1978. 52); and an abrupt move into the present, "I am writing this across a gap so filled with death--real death, the fact of it--that it is hard to believe that I am still . . . alive and writing this" (53). The tensions/links among the italicized journal entries, the memories, and the controlled exposition of the "main" text conveys the various tensions and links that Lorde herself experiences: the threatened, physically damaged and traumatized self, and the later, ongoing self, the survivor who has selected the journal entries and other interpolations, and decided which selves will make up the present text. The period of crisis, and the occasion it gives Lorde for yet another perspective on dominant attitudes towards women, is the focus of this book. However, it is the writing self and the written self as producer and product that dominate <u>The Cancer Journals.</u>

Lorde addresses this complexity explicitly, giving the matter a significance it rarely carries. In the

introduction, reflecting on the discovery of a malignant tumour in her breast, she describes the fear that now attends a cough or bruise as "another malignancy" (15). Her reaction is to transform this fear into language, for "The fears are most powerful when they are not given voice" (15). But it is this transformation into language, this giving voice that catches Lorde in a terrifying double bind:

> I write so much here about fear because in shaping this introduction to The Cancer Journals, I found fear laid across my hands like a steel bar. When I tried to reexamine the 18 months since my mastectomy, some of what I touched was molten despair and waves of mourning--for my lost breast, for time, for the luxury of false power. Not only were these emotions difficult and painful to relive, but they were entwined with the terror that if I opened myself once again to scrutiny, to feeling the pain of loss, of despair, . . . then I might also open myself again to disease (15-16).

The link between writing the self, here the self afflicted with cancer, and being that self is so powerful that Lorde fears recreating the time in words may recreate it in her body. This fear speaks not of superstition but rather of an integrated sense of mind, emotion and body. The self that experienced the disease, the self that survived it, and the self that writes it may coalesce, beginning the cycle again. Time does not collapse --but the conditions, mental and emotional, are similar, and for Lorde fear attends her awareness that the writing re-presents the constellation of her life at that time. Necessary for her integrity, however, is her ability to transform feeling into action, fear into language. This drive requires her to

remember that she "had known the pain, and survived it," and "It only remained . . . to give it voice, to share it for use, that the pain not be wasted" (16). The writing of self, then, is useful for knowing herself for herself, but the transformation of her experience into writing is to make it useful to other women as well. A privately held experience is one held in silence, and silence is one of the great forces against women.

Following the introduction (written in late August, 1980) in which she gives a kind of summary of the previous two years, Lorde opens the body of the book with a piece of writing called "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" (18). It was originally a speech Lorde gave in 1977[42] after her first cancer biopsy discovered a breast tumour to be benign, not malignant. There is pathos in these words, written in relief and strength, since the introduction has already told us that a year later a malignant tumour was discovered. But their inclusion is not for sentimental or ironic excitements; rather it shows the use she makes of her experience for her political (that is ethical/Black lesbian feminist) values. She reviews her past fears or hesitations: "To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. . . . Death . . . is the final silence. And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken . . . or

[42] The Lesbian and Literature Panel of the Modern Language Association, December 28, 1977.

had only betrayed myself into small silences . . ." (20). Lorde's realization is phrased in intensely personal language: "I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself" (20). Silence is a betrayal of the self, and speaking the self is an action, one resisting the "final silence" of death, and the everyday silences of self-betrayal. If death is silence then life must be (in part at least) language, and giving the self in language, or to language, is a death-defying act.

But the physical death that comes to all is not the most important one in Lorde's view. The "tyrannies of silence" imposed by social and political structures determine whose voices are heard, and whose words can have an effect. To speak the self (in Lorde's iconography) is to make oneself a warrior. Of the women who sustained her as she waited for the biopsy results she says, "black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence" (20). We must recall that Lorde here is making a presentation as a lesbian, an unapologetic, radical feminist, in a conventional though liberal context (an MLA convention), and she speaks of her fears: "And of course I am afraid--you can hear it in my voice--because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation that always seems fraught with danger" (21). It may be obvious that the imagery of war, tyranny,

warriors, comes from fear (as well as courage), but it is interesting that Lorde takes the danger of self-revelation as a given ("Of course I am afraid"). The danger is clear: speaking/putting ourselves into words exposes us, makes us visible and that opens us to various threats, some of them material. But apart from the external dangers Lorde says, "I think we fear the very visibility without which we cannot truly live" (21).

Lorde slips easily into exhortation, with great effect, in part because she makes the general "we" of women into the more particular "we" of connection with black women: ". . . black women have on the one hand always been highly visible," and on the other "been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism" (21). The alternative to breaking silence is to remain "mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned" (22). The "we" shifts back into an inclusive embrace, and she invites the audience into that embrace: "we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words [of women] out . . . not hide behind the mockeries of separation that have been imposed upon us" (23). Lorde concludes, "it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence" (23). From her personal or private immobility/fear/silence Lorde opens outward to the experience of other women, not only those who are like herself in specific ways (Black, lesbian,

facing death from breast cancer), but to any who are conscious of the fear imposed by the tyranny of silences. In this oratorical exhortation, Lorde makes the revelation of her own, individual self the ground of her urging. Her own fear becomes exemplary, and her words the actions she calls for in her rage for transformations.

The second large unit of The Cancer Journals is titled "Breast Cancer: A Black Lesbian Feminist Experience" (24-54). Jerome Brooks dismisses the "Black, Lesbian, Feminist" bits as irrelevant to the general female experience of breast cancer,[43] but he is absurdly wrong. Not only are The Cancer Journals the particular experiences of a particular woman who happens to be a Black, lesbian, feminist, but also the ways Lorde interprets her experience (that is, how she experiences) are shaped by the discourses of those identities. For Lorde they are the languages of her selves, and much of the writing is making that precise point explicit. Moreover, the material context in which she lives through the events that she is recounting is a female community with all the resources that a feminist context can provide. Lorde lists the names of women who in innumerable

[43] Jerome Brooks, "In the Name of the Father: The Poetry of Audre Lorde," in Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Anchor Books, 1984) 275. Brooks says, of this "brave little book" that the subtitle of the second chapter, "A Black Lesbian Feminist Experience," "is valid only to identify the author; beyond one discreet episode some twenty-five years earlier that took place in Mexico, it does not characterize what is in the text." The title of his essay makes further comment unnecessary.

ways made themselves available for her, her lover, and children during the crisis and afterward. What made breast cancer the occasion for a more intense self-hood was the fact of feminist[44] systems of support. Lorde's insisting on the list of differences is an aspect of affirming them (and that Brooks reads it as a kind of aggression to see the chapter named thus indicates the weight and ubiquity of silencings--that is how I read that Black male scholar's refusal to take seriously Lorde's specifying of her identities).[45] Consistently in these writings Lorde connects silence with difference and language with transformation.

Lorde provides precisely detailed information that is often withheld about the physical and emotional effects of the mutilating surgery she underwent. Words, however, are not Lorde's only means of action. She speaks of her body, but she also allows it to speak its own difference. Breast cancer and the (common) result of it, breast removal, are veiled and silenced. Women who have had a breast removed are expected, even required, to hide the fact. Lorde refuses a prosthesis, a false breast. Within a few days of her surgery (grim descriptions of the pain and misery precede this

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[44] Black and white, lesbian and straight, 20, 28, 29, 30, 37, 39.

[45] It is interesting to note that "specifying" is a particular kind of Black discourse. See Susan Willis, Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987). Reviewed by Barbara Christian, "Connections and Distinctions," in The Women's Review of Books 4, 10-11 (July-August 1987) 25-26.

passage) Lorde is visited by a friendly lady from "Reach for Recovery" bearing a pale pink ("flesh-coloured") false breast: "Her message was, you are just as good as you were before because you can look exactly the same . . . nobody will ever know the difference. But what she said was, 'You'll never know the difference,' and she lost me right there, because I knew sure as hell I'd know the difference" (42). Wry on the subject of difference here: the Reach for Recovery woman opens her jacket and displays "her two considerable breasts" in a tight blue sweater, challenging Lorde, "Now can you tell which is which?" Lorde says, "I admitted that I could not. In her tight foundation garment and stiff up-lifting bra, both breasts looked equally unreal to me" (42). Rejecting the unreality of a false breast is rejecting a lie, in Lorde's terms; it is rejecting the erasure of the difference between herself and women who have not undergone a mastectomy. She stuffs the pink pad into the right side of the bra she had been given: "It perched on my chest askew, awkwardly inert and lifeless, and having nothing to do with any me I could possibly conceive of" (44). It is not the absurdity of the bit of padded lambswool and nylon, pink against her brown skin that repels Lorde. She says that not even "the most skillfully designed prosthesis in the world" could undo the reality of amputation, or feel the way her breast had felt. Her own requirements are clear to her: "[E]ither I would love my

body one-breasted now, or forever remain alien to myself" (44).

She does learn to love herself, again, but her account of the hostility and disgust she meets from doctors, nurses, other women (she does not speak of general male response) shows how difficult the celebration of difference is and how loudly her body speaks it. She describes the day, some time after the surgery, when she goes to the doctor (a specialist in breast cancers) for a check-up, without a prosthesis: she walks in "with that brave new-born security of a beautiful woman having come through a very hard time and being very glad to be alive" wearing one dramatic earring "in the name of grand assymmetry" (58). She is told that to appear with an obvious absence of one breast was bad for the "morale" of the office (58). To reject the prosthesis is not only to reject the foreign object. It is to reject the right of society to decide how a woman must be as a body. She refuses, as a feminist, the view that how her body looks is the most important part of a woman, and that the external objectifiction[46] must be adhered to by every woman. Lorde mourns the loss of her right breast, not as appearance, or as an aspect of her image, but the "feeling and the fact" (65) of it. Her analysis and rejection of the "wipe-out of self" (64) that an externalized sense of self demands of women, and the part that "Cancer Inc." (62) plays in that

[46] I must let that typographical error stand.

"wipe-out" are framed in the language of female autonomy (feminism). She affirms her own subject-hood, and deciding to live in her body without disguise is part of her integrating the private and public aspects of female selfhood. The promise that "nobody will know the difference" is precisely Lorde's objection to the prosthesis. She wants to affirm, not veil, differences; and by showing herself as different, that is as one-breasted, she makes herself visible to other women. Her body speaks to them of difference, the same difference that many women live in silence.

The Cancer Journals is Lorde's way to assert her right "to define and claim" (59) her own body, and to complete the process of the new self that the first cancer biopsy initiated. Notions of wholeness and unity of self are disrupted here as the brutal (and graphically described [36]) surgery leaves Lorde with the belief that "in the process of losing a breast I had become a more whole person" (55). The irregular movement of this process and the voices Lorde brings to its textualizing/writing make The Cancer Journals a complicated text. The introduction starts with Lorde's conclusions, her survival, physically, and her intentions to prevent another "imposed silence" from acting on women as a "tool for separation and powerlessness" (9). Her personal needs and her political aims coalesce here and the text makes her rhetorical assertions and her personal

journal entries link different aspects of her experience. The body of the text, following the introduction, concentrates on various issues, but all parallel the opening movements with a mixture of essay-narrative, recounting, journal entries, and informal, conversational passages. The chronology is mixed. The final chapter, the most politically analytic of the role the "Cancer Establishment" (58) has in the lives of women, begins at the beginning: "On Labor Day, 1978, during my monthly self-examination, I discovered a lump in my right breast" (55). And the language itself takes many forms. Some have the flavour of kitchen table intimacies as in the description of her post-surgery feeling: "I found I could finally masturbate again, making love to myself for hours" (Journal entry, November 2, 1978, 25). Other journal passages are formal, ritualized, carrying the echo of the preacher: "What is there possibly left for us to be afraid of, after we have dealt face to face with death and not embraced it?" (Journal entry December 29, 1978, 25).[47] Other sections are in plain expository prose, informative with few flourishes of lyricism or exhortation, certainly reflecting a practical mind at work: "I considered the alternatives of the straight medical profession, surgery, radiation,

[47] While the reader might doubt that most journal writers speak to themselves in such high-flown terms, the journals of a poet no doubt carry a possible public future.

chemotherapy. I considered the holistic approaches of diet, vitamin therapy" (25).

This text is a spiraling one--Lorde writes layer after layer of the experience, no single issue allowed to dominate the others: death, cancer, surgery, and the attendant fear and pain; repetitions of hope, feminist support and understanding; the cycles of relationship of selves in her body and in the world and as a representative of other women and their experience; and consistently, her refusal to "waste" the experience, that is, her self, in privacy, in silence. The self (or selves) appearing in it as Audre Lorde in her various manifestations makes for a writing that seems to live close to the flesh, and yet to enjoy rhetorical authority, sureness, and even righteousness. The Cancer Journals is the transformation of all that into a feminist text.

Chapter 3: Counting the Cost: Adrienne Rich

and how I longed to live on this earth
walking her boundaries never counting the cost[1]

For Adrienne Rich, the self is not only personal but also historical, and to know one's self means to know one's history. The process of knowing is in part "counting the cost," being accountable for and to the circles that overlap between past and present, between the individual and the familial, the cultural and political. The writing of self, whether in poetry or prose, takes its place in the construction of self-hood and bears the responsibility that goes with agency. For Rich, the composition of self occurs in the act of writing. But that composition is not just the assembling of parts that lie fragmented. Self-representation rather gives words to silence and thereby makes acts of resistance to the forces within and without that have rendered "woman's story a story of silence, powerlessness, self-effacement."[2] As an act of self-conscious integrity, Rich works to speak aspects of self into being and then into relation with other parts of her self. In a poem she calls "integrity," the self speaking to self, of self, says, "but really I have nothing but myself/ to go by" and then reflects in another, italicized voice,

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[1] Adrienne Rich, Poem 18, "Contradictions: Tracking Poems," in Your Native Land, Your Life (New York: Norton, 1986) 100.
[2] Sidonie Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 53.

"Nothing but myself? . . . My Selves./ After so long this answer."[3] The process of feminist autography comes repeatedly to the assertion of a multiple and complex subjectivity. The "self" is "selves," and those "selves" are the voices present in Rich's poetry and her prose. My reading of Rich will examine the stategies by which her recurring passions become the written self. Her identity as individual and political, personal and historical, product and producer of her life and her times is explored and exposed, celebrated and eviscerated in her writing. Her sensibility about language, about writing, is a complex one, and she makes (and unmakes) a distinction that demonstrates one of her common strategies of boundary-blurring. She writes, "I used to think the worst affliction/ was to be forbidden pencil and paper. . . . I think now the worst affliction/ is not to know who you are or have been/ I have learned this in part/ from writers."[4] Writing and writers are deflated here, then partially reinstated to a place of significance in the process of knowing "who you are or have been." Words are both powerful and powerless, not everything, but deeply implicated in the knowing of self.

In 1983, Rich writes, in a poem, "Poetry never stood a chance/ of standing outside history."[5] A doubleness exists

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[3] Rich, "Integrity," in The Fact of a Door Frame (New York: Norton, 1984) 274.
[4] Rich, Poem 27, "Contradictions: Tracking Poems," 109.
[5] Rich, "North American Time" in The Fact of a Doorframe 324-328.

here, in that a poem though a different kind of writing from an essay (or speech), not necessarily under "particular historical pressures," is nevertheless an event in history.[6] Rich seems to feel a kind of desperation in her awareness of historical context and its importance:

> I am writing this in a time
> when anything we write
> can be used against those we love
> where the context is never given (327).

To treat writing otherwise is to ignore the fact that "words--/ whether we like it or not--/ stand in a time of their own" (326), and are thus vulnerable, not only to the textual violence of interpretations, but also, potentially, dangerous to "those we love." Rich's insistence on herself as "I" in the act of writing and on the historical consciousness and political awareness the "I" carries into the poem enacts the personal and political responsibility the poet has, and not just this poet. She insists on the

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[6] Rich, "Comment . . ." in The Lesbian Issue: Essays from Signs, eds. Estelle Freedman, et al. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985) (rept. from Signs 9, 4 [Summer 1984], 733-738) 131-132. The article Rich is commenting on, "'I go where I love': An Intertextual Study of H.D. and Adrienne Rich" by Susan Stanford Friedman, is also in this issue (rept. from Signs 9, 2 [Winter 1983], 228-245) 111. [Adrienne Rich's writing of a feminist self establishes and collapses boundaries that make the presence of self explicit whatever the writing. Rich, however, makes a distinction between forms in her response to Susan Friedman's intertextual reading of H.D. and Rich. Rich argues, "She quotes from my speech at the New York 1977 Gay Pride March . . . then interpolates words from that speech with words from the poem "Natural Resources" as if they were the same kind of work. A political speech is not the same as a poem. It is given for a specific audience, under particular historical pressures."]

"we." The facts of oppression are not individual: they are contextual, and textual. While words may have a time of their own, they also live in our time, in history. This doubleness parallels a further (apparent) contradiction: writing is powerful, able to effect material change in the world, and writing is powerless, vulnerable to whatever use is made of it. Only by maintaining this double vision can the feminist critic resist the tendency to write "as if 'the violence at the core of patriarchy' were an idea in the head of H.D. or AR."[7] To treat Rich's poetry as though it existed out of time, out of history, as though it were mere "idea" is to erase "both the social reality of male violence against women and the movement of women that opposes it."[8]

The urgency of these remarks and the emphasis she places on history prepare us for the intensity with which Adrienne Rich involves her own personal and private self in her writing. For Rich, feminist consciousness, independence from poetic conventions, and articulation of a personal self coalesce in the shift she made from the formal poetic structures, in which she did not yet dare to say "I" in a

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[7] Rich, "Comment" 132.

[8] Rich, "Comment" 132. It is interesting to note that the first words of Alicia Ostriker's essay on Rich, "Her Cargo: Adrienne Rich and the Common Language," are "Adrienne Rich is a poet of ideas." In Writing Like a Woman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983) 102. Seeing Rich this way does not erase the world for Ostriker who says here, "Women's anger is real, and it is legitimate" 118.

poem,[9] to a writing in which using "I" marks the affirmation and consequent transformation of self as part of, yet distinct from, her context. Speaking (or writing) the self, saying "I," is not, however, a single event. The weight of silence can wash over the speaking, with the effect of erasure. The assertion or insertion of self, and of the right to speak the self, must be repeated.

Like Audre Lorde, Rich experiences danger in speaking the self "[w]hen those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you."[10] Discovering once more that her lesbianism is an unspoken, invisible part of her--despite the fact that she has been "for ten years a very visible lesbian"--, she says:

> this experience has reminded me of what I should never have let myself forget: that invisibility is not just a matter of being told to keep your private life private, it's the attempt to fragment you, to prevent you from integrity, love, and work and feeling and ideas, with the empowerment that that can bring.[11]

With the collapse of "I" and "you" Rich affirms the impersonality of oppression. Whoever the individual is, she must resist invisiblity, silence. The link, in Lorde and now here, between being seen and being heard suggests a breakdown of the distance/dichotomy between the body in its three dimensions and the voice or language (or writing).

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[9] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1971), in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978 (New York: Norton, 1979) 45.
[10] Rich, "Invisibility in Academe" (1984), in Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985 (New York: Norton, 1986) 199.
[11] Rich, "Invisibility in Academe," 200.

Here the displacement of the person by print is not at all an issue. Here the self in writing, in language, in public is in no way a negation or denigration (or a defacement) of self. Rather it is the place of transformation made accessible to others: to speak the fragmentation, the suppression, is to resist it, to refuse it, and thus to make a gesture of integration--this is one aim of transformation.[12] To write, for example, "I am a lesbian" is to take the power of naming the self. As the "I" and the "you" are mutually bound here in the need to link our "love and work and feelings and ideas,"[13] Rich's refusal to be silent embraces all readers who (feel they) have not the power to name themselves. Like silence, the issue of fragmentation is integral to her mature poetry. She speaks of the process of integration: "I began to resist the apparent splitting of poet from woman, thinker from woman, and to write what I feared was political poetry."[14] In early "political poetry" (anti-war, pro-civil rights), Rich found "little location of the self, the poet's own identity as man or woman," and "felt driven--for [her] own sanity--to bring together in [her] poems" politics ("out there") and "supposedly private" life (181). Of this poetry of the late

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[12] Rich says, "I write for the still-fragmented parts in me." See n. 31, above, in Chapter II.
[13] Rich, "Invisibility in Academe," 200.
[14] Rich, "Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet" (1984), in Blood, Bread, and Poetry 176. Further references to this essay will appear in the text.

60's, Rich says says she felt "the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action" (181).

The evolution of Rich's consciousness, the contradictions and continuities of the self, in the relations of poetry to political and personal presence is an exciting study. It is not, however, my immediate concern.[15] Rather, I wish to consider her most recent essays and poetry in order to track the various provisional selves as Rich herself does. Rich's writing of a feminist self as a political, socio-cultural phenomenon describes past selves with confidence in some pieces and uncertainty in others. The present speaking self is sometimes sure and analytic, at others, troubled and grappling. Whatever the tone or mood of Rich's writing, no aspect of her self made into the language of polemic is exempt from considerations of class, race, gender, sexual identity--the relations of power and her place(s) in the power structures.

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[15] Studies of Rich's development as a poet appear in the following books: Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, The Transforming Power of Language: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich (Utrecht: HES Publishers, 1984); Wendy Martin, An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, and Adrienne Rich (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Janice Markley, A New Tradition? The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich (Frankfurt, Bern, New York: Peter Lang, 1984); Helen Vendler, Part of Nature, Part of Us (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) esp. 237-270; Claire Keyes, The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1986); Charles Altieri, Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) esp. 165-190; David Kalstone Five Temperments (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) esp. 129-169; and Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-Visions, 1951-1981 ed. Jane Roberta Cooper (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984).

In her prose, Rich seems stuck in historical responsibilities. To know and to name herself is to place herself in categories--Jewish, lesbian, white, American,[16] and then to examine her differences from and differences within the distinctive groups, whether they be marginal or dominant. For Rich these groupings are ways of knowing herself and ways of being in the world, and her essays explore the epistemologies of selfhood allowed and required, or suppressed, by taking on the self as part of a larger context. By way of autobiographical descriptions she examines the sexual and racial dynamics of the United States, and the ways those forces divide women against each other and within themselves. Rich's autobiographical material (often used as illustration or example) in some of her early feminist writing[17] is conventional in that she seems to treat the present summations as the "true" story. Yet Rich, consistently, asserts that any moment of fixity is provisional; always the possibility of change, of revision, is affirmed/inherent in the prose. The belief that any single telling of a story is sufficient is inimical to Rich's belief that "[t]ruthfulness anywhere means a heightened complexity. But it is a movement into evolution.

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[16] That is, the United States variety of American--a necessary distinction, one she is increasingly careful to make, and one which other Americans can appreciate.

[17] I am referring to a general impression formed, mostly, by the personal writing in Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: Norton, 1976) esp. 1-15, 190-193, 257-259, and various passages in the essays in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence.

Women are only beginning to uncover our own truths; many of us would be grateful for some rest in that struggle".[18] In "evolution," exposure and change are inextricable. For Rich the "hearing and saying of women" breaks silence within our selves, and transforms "forever the way we see."[19] This is an ongoing process, never complete. The stages of transformation of self allow and demand new speakings of self (our "truths") and our visions of previous experience. Within the context of community and history, then, the feminist self changes and is changed as breaking silence, putting self into words, transforms reality.

The membrane between the self as part of a group and the self as a privately experienced, separate being is troublingly permeable. Increasingly, Rich affirms a politics of identity[20] in which the personal and the political displace each other repeatedly in any movement of identity or relationship. Rich brings this tension into play when she argues against abstraction of female experience. She speaks of "the body": "When I write 'the body,' I see nothing in particular. To write 'my body'

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[18] Rich, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" (1975), in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, 193.

[19] Rich, "Motherhood: The Contemporary Emergency and the Quantum Leap" (1978), in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, 260.

[20] The phrase is from "A Black Feminist Statement" by the Combahee River Collective, in This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981) 212.

plunges me into lived experience, particularity."[21] She goes on to speak those particularities of that lived body, including the socio-political effects: "the teeth of a middle-class person seen by the dentist twice a year from childhood. White skin, marked and scarred by three pregnancies, an elected sterilization, progressive arthritis . . . four joint operations." This body is defined by what it has not lived, but was vulnerable to, as well: "no rapes, no abortions" (215). The self lived in this designated body is peculiarly impersonal. Generalized by class, and by the metaphor of race ("white" people do not really have white skin), the body of Adrienne Rich is here a phenomenon of external influences and events, and as a "self" is not a psychological or even a felt being in this description. Rich says "I" and "my" of this body, yet her ways of speaking it are empirical, factual, rather than felt; however, this body is also not an image, not a looked-at-object but a combination of reported experience and events. Rich's aim in this essay (the title is significant: "Notes Toward a Politics of Location") is to take on her body as a political fact. Her concern here is to combat the impulse to abstract, to universalize, that she finds in women writing "the body." The components of self (or the factors that comprise an identity) located in one's body

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[21] Rich, "Notes Toward a Politics of Location" (1984), in Blood, Bread and Poetry, 215. Further references to this essay appear in the text.

are not in themselves singular, and all must be acknowledged and considered--not only as female fact and meaning: "It means recognizing this white skin, the places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go" (215-216). For Rich, then, the "plunge" into lived experience that comes for her with saying "my body" is not necessarily experience to be written. Nevertheless, the particularities of her body place her in a context that she must, as part of her feminist ethics, take account of and be accountable to and for.

Her body is not the only factor in this process. To know, live, and write her self, Rich has to explore[22] and discover and create her self as a Jew. She opens the essay "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982)[23] with awareness of her fear. She places herself physically and emotionally, "sitting chin in hand in front of the typewriter, staring out at the snow." She is trying to "figure out why writing this seems to be so dangerous an act, filled with fear and shame" (100). Like Audre Lorde, Rich finds her emotion at the moment of writing instructive. The interspace between the living and the writing, the self and the text, is charged with danger and fear. For Lorde, the source of fear is her reluctance to be visible, known.

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[22] This is the wrong word--some parts of this landscape may be already present, laid out, while others, surely, are established in the acts of writing this identity.

[23] Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," (1982) in Blood, Bread and Poetry, 100-123. Further references to this essay will appear in the text.

Rich, too, analyses her fear: As an ardent and radical feminist Rich wanted, like Virginia Woolf, to think back through [her] mothers, not her father.[24] To claim her Jewishness she must "claim" her father, and then break the silence he imposed on the fact of his Jewishness. The double movement of disloyalty she faces here--challenging a feminist rigidity by embracing her father as part of her self (though Rich was never a separatist, disburdening one's self of the father's mantle is necessarily part of a feminist development) and breaking his "taboos" by speaking as a Jew--is insufficient to account for the fear and shame she feels at this writing. Rich must attend to "the third thing." She says, "I have to face the sources and the flickering presence of my own ambivalence as a Jew; the daily mundane anti-Semitisms of my entire life" (100). To write this self (of her Jewish identity) is to make a mirror in which Rich faces a multiply mobile, consistent ("daily") but unstable ("flickering") self against self. The other, here both male and Jew, must be claimed, as a gesture toward wholeness, integrity, away from silence, suppression. For Rich, the writing of self does not silence the other within the self, nor the conflicted feelings about either taking on or denying her Jewishness. Rich speaks always as a

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[24] Since Jewish heritage is passed through the maternal line, the fact that Rich's father, not her mother, was Jewish makes her struggle to find/create her Jewishness very complex. Moreover, her father disguised the fact that he was a Jew.

particularized self, one with a social (hence political) identity.

While the multiplicity of selves stands, recognized, interrogated, from within and without, the written self becomes a kind of social metaphor. The silences within her about her own Jewishness lie parallel to the silent (and overt) anti-semitism in her culture. Rich, then, comes to know herself as one might come to know another person. The difference is that the other whom Rich is coming to know is inextricably linked with the self she calls "I" in her lived experience and her written life. She writes as though she were talking to herself, as though her efforts to know herself are as important to us as to her, as though the reader is another self she is musing with:

> These are stories I never tried to tell before. Why now? Why, I asked myself sometime last year, does this question of Jewish identity float so impalpably, so ungraspably around me . . . ? . . . And yet I've been on the track of this longer than I think (100-101).

At the moment of writing, Rich has not "settled" the question of her Jewish identity, but she is in the midst of coming to know what she did not know she knew: the "stories" seem to be the lived experiences, not yet told, nor even attempted. Yet she has been on this "track"--this word opens to discovery and movement, as in "to track" an elusive object, and and then narrows to a noun, as in

railway "track," inevitable, laid down, unyielding.[25]

Repeatedly in Rich's writing and for Rich, the issue of choice appears, but having made a choice does not eliminate questions. In the midst of her examination of her ambivalences about Jewishness, she registers her impulse to silence the complexity of her feelings and of the situation. She would like to take on an identity whole, and thus erase other, equally troubling parts of herself. Speaking of the "collusion" of white women with white men in the "southern racist scenario," for example, she says,

> It would be easy to push away and deny the gentile in me--that white southern woman, that social christian. At different times in my life I have wanted to push away one or the other burden of inheritance, to say merely I am a woman; I am a lesbian (103).

That is, Rich sometimes wishes to make her personal self and the political program of (white) feminism a perfect match, and to reduce to essentialist status the fact of being a woman, a lesbian, as though that were a simple identity. To do so, however, would be too close to the program Rich grew up with in the South. She describes the white, Christian world, of family and social context, in which having "ideals" or "manners" included "not hurting someone's feelings by calling her or him a Negro or a Jew--naming the hated identity" (104). To name, then, is once more to make

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[25] The title of a recent collection of poems is "Contradictions: Tracking Poems." She may wish to convey the doubleness of this effect, of fixity and of movement, of possibility and of inevitablity, as aspects of the process of knowing/writing the self.

visible, apparent, things that already may be perfectly obvious.

Following these disclosures about her family's standards, she writes, "(Writing this I feel dimly like the betrayer: of my father . . . of my mother . . . of my caste and class; of my whiteness itself)" (104). Not only must we remain conscious that this is a writing, that a single person sits writing (with whatever complex of discourses that are available to her at the time), but also that this writing produces effects which then also become part of the self, and therefore must also be written. That Rich's writing here is, indeed, autography, rather than autobiography, is indicated by the parenthetical passage. Rich maintains a distinction between what was then and what is now, through the use of the parenthesis. The intrusion into her ongoing text does not disrupt it or dislocate it, but rather affirms what she is saying about the lines drawn, the walls built between what can be spoken and what cannot, and that the individual carries and recreates those early impressions. Whiteness, then, is not merely a fact, but a stand, and to expose its secrets, the lessons on "ideals" or "manners" learned in an intellectual and liberal family, is to betray it. Rich's deep revulsion against racism cannot silence the racist voices of her internal context; in fact, they must be exposed, and in giving those voices a language, more aspects of her self are available for transformation.

Guilt, and shame for feeling guilty, are not the only emotions this writing of her childhood arouses. She describes watching, at the age of sixteen, the documentary newsreels of the liberation of prisoners from Nazi concentration camps and says, "Writing this now, I feel belated rage that I was so impoverished by the family and social worlds I lived in, that I had to figure out by myself what this did indeed mean for me" (107). Rich's emotional responses to the past in the present writing reveal that like the past selves, the present self is complex, even contradictory, and that the writing makes the variations within the self known, and perhaps knowable. It is in the act of writing that Rich experiences her internalized shame at "betraying" the social codes of anti-semitism, white supremacy, intellectual graciousness. The betrayals that carry the deepest charge for Rich are those not of parental or social expectation, but of the self,

> committed so repeatedly, so mundanely, that they leave no memory trace behind, only a growing residue of misery, of dull accreted self-hatred. Often these take the form not of words but of silence. Silence before the joke at which everyone is laughing: the anti-woman joke, the racist joke, the anti-Semitic joke. Silence and then amnesia (109).

Writing/speaking the self may be experienced emotionally as the sediment of childhood training. But the deeper betrayal of the self comes not in speaking but in silence, and in the accretion of "self-hatred" that is inevitable when fear

controls response.[26] The "amnesia" that follows silence may be metaphorical here, but elsewhere Rich has written: "amnesia is the silence of the unconscious . . . to lie habitually, as a way of life, is to lose contact with the the unconscious. . . . Lying is done with words, and also with silence."[27] Connections within self, or of self with self, are damaged, disrupted with the lies/betrayals of silence. These disruptions create an internal silence Rich calls amnesia--very simply, one could be said to forget one's self.[28]

Remembering the silenced, forgotten, denied, betrayed parts of one's self does not, however, bring the self into easy harmony. Rich is troubled by the impossibility of wholeness. She writes,

> Sometimes I feel I have seen too long from too many disconnected angles: white, Jewish, anti-Semite,

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[26] Teresa de Lauretis speaks of the "continuing significance, for feminism, of a 'politics of the unconscious'; for women's consent [to femininity] may not be gotten easily but it is finally gotten, and has been for a long time, as much by rape and economic coercion as by the more subtle and lasting effects of ideology, representation, and identification." Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 134.

[27] "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" 186-87.

[28] Does this bespeak an essential, or a "true" self? The quest for or question of a "true self" seems especially problematic for lesbian feminists, and the point is raised in the question: "What is a lesbian discovering when she feels she is discovering her true self?" Jean E. Kennard, "Ourself Behind Ourself: A Theory for Lesbian Readers," in The Lesbian Issue: Essays from SIGNS, eds. Estelle B. Freedman, et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 155. Rich seems likely to agree with the feminist critic (whose name is lost to me) who observed that though there may be no single truth, there are certainly falsehoods.

> racist, anti-racist, once-married, lesbian, middle-class, feminist, exmatriate southerner, split at the root--that I will never bring them whole. I would have liked, in this essay, to bring together the meanings of anti-Semitism and racism as I have experienced them and as I believe they intersect the world beyond my life. But I'm not able to do this yet (122).

Her personal self, attitudes, values, experiences are gathered and listed here, not only as aspects of self, but as ethical and political issues. "In this essay" seems an important phrase: the writing about/of Jewish identity was to create a Jewish identity more comfortable than the one Rich had yet developed. But the effort could not succeed for herself as individual, nor as political commentator. She writes:

> I am not yet able to do this yet. I feel the tension as I think, make notes: If you really look at one reality, the other will waver and disperse. . . . Sometimes I feel inadequate to make any statement as a Jew; I feel the denial of history within me like an injury (122).

Always the language is the place of possibility, of anxiety, of loss--and the place of wish. Again, taking the risk of entering language carries ethical significance. Rich makes a very delicate balance in the conclusion of this essay, confessing her inability to "bring them whole," while affirming her right/responsibility to speak: "we can't wait for the undamaged to make our connections for us; we can't wait to speak until we are perfectly clear" (123). To take on the silenced and denied aspects of self is, for Rich, to enlarge the "range of accountability." "This essay," she says, ". . . is another beginning for me" (123), one that

demonstrates what she means when she speaks of accountability as engaging every aspect of [her] identity.

That engagement requires of Rich an examination of her life in language and denies even language as a safe place. Her range of accountability takes her from silence and denial into speech. But it requires of her as a poet acknowledgement that the language she has been using is not necessarily trustworthy, or that an aesthetics of language may be an insufficient standard (beauty is not necessarily truth). She speaks of herself as "the poet who knows that beautiful language can lie, that the oppressor's language sometimes sounds beautiful" (123).

Rich moves from first person singular to plural and finally to third person at the end of this essay as she lists her identities. This is a perplexing move in the light of an earlier piece in which she speaks (again) of fear. Using herself as an an illustration of the process women writers go through, she describes the "deliberate detachment" with which she wrote, emphasizing the split between self as poet and self as woman, in some poems using "the persona of a man."[29] Even when she wrote from the position of a woman (an "extraordinary relief")[30] she says, "I hadn't found the courage yet . . . to use the pronoun 'I' --the woman in the poem is always 'she.'[31] In more recent

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[29] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" (1971), in Lies, Secrets, and Silence 41.
[30] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken" 45.
[31] Rich, "When We Dead Awaken" 45.

writing of both poems and prose Rich uses "I," but not invariably, and the gaps are suggestive. Roland Barthes sees a sinister aspect in speaking/writing about self in the third person: "To speak about oneself by saying "he" can mean: I am speaking about myself as though I were more or less dead. . . . or again: I am speaking about myself in the manner of the Brechtian actor who must distance his character: 'show' rather than incarnate him."[32] Barthes goes on, "it annuls and mortifies its referent."[33]

Rich might agree that her early uses of the third person serve a kind of possum effect. The self speaking plays dead and directs attention to a position or makes certain moves using "she" or even "he" as a stand-in. But when the speaker is a feminist committed to integration and the third person is "she," does the same distancing, the same annulment, occur? In the concluding paragraph of "Split at the Root" Rich says,

> I know that . . . every aspect of my identity will have to be engaged. The middle-class white girl . . . . The Jewish lesbian raised to be a heterosexual gentile . . . . The woman with three sons, the feminist who hates male violence . . . . The woman limping . . . . The poet who knows . . . . The woman trying, as part of her resistance, to clean up her act.[34]

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[32] Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 168. Philippe Lejeune notes of this text that "the typography leaves us in doubt as to whether "by Roland Barthes" is a part of the title or the name of the author." "Autobiography in the Third Person," (NLH IX, 1 [Aug. 1977] 35), n. 15. Of course confusion exists only if one is fixed in an either/or mode of thought.

[33] Barthes 169.

[34] Rich, "Split at the Root" 123.

The "I" here in its various aspects becomes a medley of characters, seen, described as from the outside. Again Barthes' "autobiography" is provocative: "You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image. . . . especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images."[35] While Barthes here may be thinking of what one looks like, how we see (know, look at) ourselves is not limited to assessment or evaluation. The forces that Rich uses are also a kind of repertoire of images, each held up in a kind of immobility. Indeed, the splits and fragments that Rich speaks of seem here to be frozen into the language of self-description, as characters independent of each other, uninforming and unforming of each other. The "self" in this listing is displayed as a series of figures, as many third-persons, not incarnated with the fluidity of motion. This list could have the effect of "eliminating the referent," Rich herself. Rich, however, has forestalled this response with her earlier assertion of "we": when she says "we can't wait to speak," she includes the women she is as well as the women she is not. It may be that the tension in Rich between the various "shes" is that her relationship with (within) herself is akin to her relationship with other women. Barthes' "I" may become a "he" or even a "you," but "we" is not in his repertoire of alternatives. When Barthes says of the use of the third

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[35] Barthes 36 (no page number given).

person, "I always envision a kind of murder by language . . . whose entire scene . . . is gossip,"[36] he does not mean gossip as "emotional speculation,"[37] but as dissection: the dismembering of the absent, hence vulnerable, other. He concentrates on the connotation of judgement by two persons of a third. When Rich displays the "aspects of her identity" in the third person, she is certainly presenting (and representing) herself for judgement, as accountable. The difference is that Rich is present in all her persons, singular and plural, first, second, and third. She speaks to the reader of "the woman who . . . ." This invites assessment, while the parade of identities or "aspects" seems to diffuse focus. No one figure in the list can be singled out, yet each must be acknowledged. Her use of the final slangy phrase, "clean up her act," invokes the stage, a character, performance. The "clean up" is also an act, the act of resistance. The behavior (that is, identity) offered by her culture is an act, a performance, leading to self-hatred, unearned privilege, suppression, silence. The resistance may also be a performance, acting an identity; and identity may be action, not "natural," not unself-conscious, not a connected whole harmonious self, but a series or sequence of "aspects" of identity. The first person as subject, as "I," in this writing and the third

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[36] Barthes 169.
[37] Patricia Meyer Spacks, Gossip (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 3.

person as subject (topic) here are both engaged, the interior person and the socio-historical one, meeting and overlapping and diverging in the act of writing, which is where we see Rich cleaning up her "act."

A vivid demonstration of Rich's efforts to "clean up her act" is apparent in the changing approach she has to using the words of other women writers in her poems (identifying interpolations with italics). With their words Rich had articulated/enacted the imaginative identification with all women[38] that she put forward as a definition of feminism. Recently, however, Rich has re-examined that definition, finding in it an arrogance, an unintended assumption of authority--as though all women's lives were automatically accessible to the imagination of a white North American. In "Notes toward a Politics of Location" (1984), Rich says that "feelings are useless without facts. . . . all privilege is ignorant at the core" (226). And in her poetry since A Wild Patience, she has used the voices or words of other women much more sparingly. In part, this must be understood as a retreat from the assumption of centrality. She writes,

> I do not any longer believe--my feelings do not any longer allow me to believe--that the white eye sees from the center. Yet I often find myself thinking as if I still believed that were true. Or rather, ~~my~~ thinking stands still. I feel in a state of arrest, as if my brain and heart were refusing to speak to each other (226).

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[38] Rich, Foreword, Blood, Bread, and Poetry x.

Here we see Rich revising, re-articulating, forcing more and more precision on the definition or description so that the voice of the poet speaking through (and thus for) others must find in her own self the stuff of writing.

In the prose, Rich concentrates on one or another aspect of her identity (lesbian, Jewish, mother, white woman) depending on the issue at hand.[39] As "I," she makes her issues and arguments grow out of immediate personal experience, and by allowing/requiring herself to engage with the various silenced or suppressed or denied parts of herself, she achieves a broad and deep personal base for her political values. The prose is the written self as polemic, in which the self is transformed in small stages, manifesting in the writing of an individual what de Lauretis encounters in a women's tradition: "that political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice by which the relations of the subject in social reality can be rearticulated from the historical experience of women."[40]

Adrienne Rich's prose inscribes a textual self that is unstable, provisional, urgently self-disclosing, attentive to its own processes and explicit in manifesting them. The ethics of the written feminist self, making "acts of

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[39] See "The Soul of a Woman's College" (1984), in Blood, Bread, and Poetry, in which she constructs a dialogue between two characters, herself and Ellen Scripps, founder of a 19th-century women's college. Rich refers to her dramatization of Scripp's attitudes towards women's education as "poetic license" (196).

[40] Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't 186.

resistance" in textual processes and product, are discernible everywhere in Rich's essays. Various configurations of identity have found voice in the prose, as Rich's reconsiderations and reconstructions of her (feminist) self are textually layered with flexibility and continuity.

But Adrienne Rich is a poet. The subtle distinction between the written self in prose and the written self in poetry suggests a different possibility of selfness, or different ways of Rich's knowing that complex self. When issues, concerns, subject (as agent and topic) are the same in an essay as they are in a poem, then where do we look to find the written self? Is it the same self? Is it a different self in the different mode of writing? In a self that differs from itself as a matter of experience, emotional immediacy, political values, and textual ethics, to speak of the difference of self from self as a difference of or within form is to enter a terribly uncertain discourse.[41] I will not attempt to develop a general

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[41] Deconstructive criticism with its program of seeing all language as merely language and its resistance to privileging various kinds of texts offers much in reading within various forms, but less in describing differences between them. See Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker, eds. Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); J. Hillis Miller, The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Jonathan Culler, The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) and On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Barbara Johnson, The Critical

statement that would be always true of a poem and not ever true of an essay or a novel. Although I agree in general with Charles Altieri's assertion that for Rich, "[p]oetry . . . is not different from other modes of discourse except for the focussed interrelations it emphasizes and the emotional challenges it poses,"[42] I find the understatement distorting. It is precisely in the poetry's "focussed interrelations" and "emotional challenges" that the most vivid and intense autography appears. Because the language is compressed, the images specific and the strategies varied, Rich's poetry represents an acute engagement of the tension between presence and absence in the written self.

A comment Rich made long before she wrote as a feminist, but after she extricated herself from "that perfection of order" which resulted in poems that she felt "were queerly limited," is that she had "suppressed, omitted, falsified . . . certain disturbing elements." She describes her experience as a writer who "can no longer go to write a poem with a neat handful of materials and express those materials according to a prior plan." Rich says,

> what I know I know through making poems. . . . the poem itself engenders new sensations, new awareness in me as

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Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

[42] Charles Altieri, Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 178. Readers will note that Rich objects to treating a political speech and a poem "as if they were the same kind of work." See footnote six, above. I believe the qualification I make to Altieri's assertion provides a fair statement of the difference in modes of discourse.

> it progresses. . . . I am getting poems that <u>are</u> experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it.[43]

The process of writing the poem and the form it takes are both active in their effect on the maker. The poem "progresses" and Rich responds to it; yet it is her own knowledge and feeling to which she is responding. The writing has made her self different, and the difference changes the writing.

Later Rich integrates her politics and processes into that experience of being written or changed by the writing:

> Trying to construct ideas and images afresh, by staying close to concrete experience, for the purpose of alleviating a common reality that is felt to be intolerable--this seems to me fair work for the imagination.[44]

This assertion is more complex and subtle than it appears at first glance. The "ideas and images" have a previous and ongoing existence. They are part of the language of the tribe, or the discourse of a community. To "construct" them "afresh" is not done by merely reorganizing the words, reshaping the syntax. Rich speaks of "staying close to concrete experience"--if all experience were wholly mediated by language, were given its meaning by the stories that are told about it, resistance could not exist. In these words Rich is affirming the possibility of experience whose

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[43] "Poetry and Experience: Statement at a Poetry Reading" (1964), in <u>Adrienne Rich's Poetry</u>, eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton, 1975) 89.
[44] Rich, Foreword, <u>Blood, Bread, and Poetry</u> x.

meaning is not already determined in/by language. The concreteness--here I take her to mean that which is not abstract, or abstracted--is physical, particular, precise, historical. To stay close to concrete experience must be to stay conscious of and feeling in one's body. Rich here makes this quality of consciousness a strategy, a method of making the language "afresh." It is the "how." The "why"--to alleviate an intolerable "common" reality--rests on another assumption: that a shared consciousness is possible, that "reality" is not constructed or felt by individuals, one by one, but that perception and feeling and response can be held by a group. The "fair work" this task of construction makes for imagination thus rests on an entanglement and engagement of language and body, on the individual efforts of the poet, and the common reality accessible through the writing.

Rich's assertion of "concrete experience" as a valid source of feminist poetics invites a particular kind of criticism. Margaret Homans' discussion of feminist poetry in Women Writers and Poetic Identity deals with the issue directly.[45] Unfortunately, Homans' argument is reductive in her account of "the prevailing feminist opinion" that "poetry by women must report on the poet's experience as a woman, and that it must be true" (216). She challenges the

[45] Margaret Homans, Women Writers and Poetic Identity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). Further references to this book will appear in the text.

figure she creates (poet as documentary reporter), explaining, "this emphasis on truth implies a mistaken, or at least naive, belief about language's capacity not just for precise mimesis but for literal duplication of experience" (216). Notice the distinction between this reductiveness and the comments of Rich ("To construct ideas and images afresh by staying close to concrete experience"). Contrast as well Homans' view with Barbara Templeton's observation that "from a feminist perspective the poetic experience, as an event of openended dialogue between the poet and reader, offers the most acute critique of the pretense of ideological closure within literary criticism and poetic theory."[46] The new solipsism (and "ideological closure") of Homans' view of all "language as inherently fictive" (216) is undermined by her absolutism as she pins her argument to an authoritative position. She asserts,

> it is chasing phantoms to expect that language will suddenly work for the expression of women's truth. This aim is fundamentally antithetical to the aims of poetry, and it dooms itself by denying itself the power that poetry genuinely offers (216).

Layers of falsification appear here. The struggle of women to make of language a medium of communication or expression of their "truths"--plural, not singular-- could be a thesis in itself. Whether language itself in patriarchy is a foreign tongue to women has been a persistent question, with

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[46] Barbara Alice Templeton, A Feminist Theory of Poetics (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1984) 136.

feminists finding answers or possibilities on every side of the issue. The arguments range from the views of some feminists that the existing language works perfectly well to the belief that it can work with some adjustment; others think it requires "double double unthink" to be functional for women, and still others believe that it needs utter fracturing and recreating, from its vocabulary to its syntax.[47] Homans' assertion that feminists expect that "language will suddenly work" is such a distortion as to seem intentionally discrediting of the consistent attention feminists have paid to language. Note too the firm way that Homans asserts her grasp of poetry and its "aims": "This aim [the expression of women's "truth"] is fundamentally antithetical to the aims of poetry." If we accept this, we must accept that the aims of poetry are somewhere written down and the "power that poetry genuinely offers" has to be guarded against the false powers that some deluded females have gotten muddled by. Although Homans articulates her submission to semiotic and deconstructive procedures, Women Writers and Poetic Identity embodies the old patriarchal

[47] A few examples here will demonstrate my point: Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Sexual Linguistics: Gender, Language, Sexuality," New Literary History, XVI, 3 (Spring 1985); Catherine R. Stimpson, "Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English," in Writing and Sexual Difference, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 243-259; Virginia Woolf, "Women and Fiction," in Women and Writing, selected and introduced by Michele Barrett (London: The Women's Press, 1979) esp. 48; Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) esp. 8-9.

lines of capital T truth and B beauty, with "fundamentals" and "genuinenesses" somehow accessible to Homans. Nowhere are her underlying values more exposed than in her comparison of Rich's and Wordsworth's "self" in their poems:

> The [feminists'] naive wish for a literal language and the belief in poetry's capacity for the duplication of experience foster a conception of the feminine self in poetry that is, paradoxically, even more egotistical than some of the masculine paradigms from which it intends to free itself. In the poetics of 'female experience' the poet's own female 'I' must be unabashedly present in the poem, in order for the poem to be true. The poet must not hide behind a mask of convention or let her modesty exclude her from the poem altogether. . . .
>
> . . . when Rich says, 'I am Adrienne alone' . . . that particular, personal 'I' differs greatly from the sense of self that underlies much of Romantic poetry. Wordsworth, egoist though he is, does not name himself Wordsworth; 'creative soul' and 'Poet' are names that enlarge the self, where explicit naming would diminish it. Claiming one's own subjectivity seems, from the example of the nineteenth-century poets, a necessary precondition of writing poetry, but the unmasked and reductive 'I' is only a further function of that belief in the literal, that it can be expressed and have literal effects. The new 'I' has nothing to do with creative power; its purpose is to make poetry approximate as closely as possible a personal spoken communication (217-218).

Here, "personal spoken communication" and "creative power" are seen as exclusive categories; here, "self" is enlarged, and that enlargement is not only possible but desirable, by the designation "Poet"; here, "explicit naming" diminishes self; here, an "I" unencumbered by <u>conventional</u> masks is "reduced," is "literal"; here, being "modest" or "abashed" are values that women ought not eschew; and here, to speak one's own name in a poem is more naughtily "egotistical" than to present one's self as "creative soul."

Of course, Homans' disdain, even contempt, for the feminist poetics that she has invented for her argument is based on the distinctions between the trivial and the significant, the ordinary and the creative, that have made up poetic tradition. These values are obvious even in the short passages I have quoted. And indeed, feminist poets have little interest in the Romantic ideal of the inflated, though alienated, Poet. The various poetic practices of feminists have in common a belief in "poetry's participation in reifying, criticizing, and conceiving particular social and political practices."[48] Engagement, not withdrawal--however engagement may be understood by the individual writer--seems a consistent element in feminist poetics. And in the poetics of Adrienne Rich "participation" in the world requires and allows her to trace the world in herself. She tells us in "North American Time" that "[s]ometimes" she has felt the "grandiose idea" that she has been "called to engage/this field of light and darkness."

> But underneath the grandiose idea
> is the thought that what I must engage
> after the plane has raged onto the tarmac
> after climbing my old stairs, sitting down
> at my old window
> is meant to break my heart and reduce me to silence.[49]

Rich's participation in the struggle against injustice brings her a double consciousness: one she treats warily,

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[48] Templeton, 142.
[49] Rich, "North American Time" (1983) in Your Life, Your Native Land 36.

mistrusting the exaltation she feels in the call to battle; the other is her realization that she "must engage" and that the everyday demands of the world are terribly costly. No invincible heroic figure lives in this poem. The poet is here, however, and in the last line, out of exhaustion and through the "toxic swamps, the testing-grounds," Rich writes, "and I start to speak again."[50] She will not be reduced to silence, nor will she veil the weight of her responsibility as a feminist and a poet.

In part Rich's desire to understand her own sense of mission or calling, her capacity to engage, and her commitment to speaking her "selves" in her world make up the questions that she asks in her recent long poem Sources (1981-82).[51] Rich's scrupulous historical sensibility about her transformations in language is the frame from which she takes note of herself asking, as she has asked before, what is the source of her strength. The occasion of the poem is a visit back to a New England region she had left sixteen years before. The trip evokes a precise geographical, personal, and cultural mapping, which takes Rich back in memory, in relationships, and in her own poetry. The places, both interior and exterior, must not be glossed, must be examined and travelled precisely, revisited in the specific time of this journey, August, 1981. The dates

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[50] Rich, "North American Time," 36.
[51] Adrienne Rich, Sources (Woodside, California: The Heyeck Press, 1983). Sources also is part of Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems, 1986, 3-27.

matter, always, to Rich. The specific dates support her resistance to the false view of poetry, that it stands outside its time, that it is eternal--an eternal form perhaps. And when the poem from within itself fixes the date, as does Sources, self-reflexive significance and historic fact blend.

Rich uses various forms in the twenty-three sections of the poem, including dialogues with her own voices and those of others, interpolations from old poems, and prose addresses to her dead father and husband and, in the conclusion, to the listening reader. To trace the "sources" of her strength, and of her self, Rich starts in the present, a particular moment in time and location:

> Sixteen years. The narrow, rough-gullied backroads
> almost the same. The farms: almost the same,
> . . .
> new names, old kinds of names: Rocquette, Desmarais,
> Clark, Pierce, Stone. Gossier. No names of mine.
>
> The vixen I met at twilight on Route 5
> south of Willoughby: long dead. She was an omen
> to me, surviving, herding her cubs
> in the silvery bend of the road
> in nineteen sixty-five.
>
> Shapes of things: so much the same
> they feel like eternal forms: the house and barn
> . . .
> Shape of queen anne's lace, with the drop of blood.
> Bladder-campion veined with purple.
> Multifoliate heal-all.

Rich takes the descriptive mapping of what she sees on this return trip and layers this writing with that of a memory sixteen years old and a poem that appeared in 1968. In

"Abnegation" Rich describes driving "along the road/ to a house nailed together by Scottish/ Covenanters, instinct mortified," where she encountered that first vixen "at twilight on Route 5." She said then, "I could be more/ her sister than theirs/ who chopped their way across these hills/ --a chosen people."[52] Using her own writing as intertext both affirms the issue of looking back to an original time, and undermines the notion of an origin: the earlier poem too was looking for connection, for sources. Even then Rich felt herself an alien from the Protestant Scots and the French Catholics of the northeastern U.S. and hungered for relationship. Now as then she is concerned with survival and omens of survival. The poem's layered history works as the poet's memory, and the sensation of "eternal forms" rests on recognition and familiarity. The repetition of "things" and "names" (even the familiarity of difference--"No names of mine") confers a kind of reassurance. The most consistent of forms, those of the recognized plants, are named. The last line is "Multifoliate heal-all."

The "heal-all" is cast into sharp doubt as Rich makes an abrupt shift in mood in the first line of II: "I refuse to become a seeker after cures." With the heal-all, the

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[52] Rich, "Abnegation" (1968), in The Fact of a Doorframe 93. Readers should also note Myriam Diaz-Dioscaretz's work on "The Intertextual Factor as Feminist Strategy," in Translating Poetic Discourse: Questions of Feminist Strategies in Adrienne Rich (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company 1985) 67-83.

familiar names and forms are dismissed and the "unnamed," the "diffuse" are valorized:

> I refuse to become a seeker for cures.
> Everything that has ever
> helped me has come through what already
> lay stored in me. Old things, diffuse, unnamed, lie strong
> across my heart.
> This is from where
> my strength comes, even when I miss my strength
> even when it turns on me
> like a violent master.

There is stasis here, in this firm declaration of resistance to an implied pressure. Rich celebrates her interior life, despite its uncertainty, sure that the "diffuse" or "unnamed" things that are "stored" within her are the source of strength she needs for survival. She seems to be content here with the certainty and the comfort of mysterious "unnamed" things lying "strong across [her] heart." The potential of strength to become a "violent master," however, disturbs the mood of assurance.

Strength, then, in the tones of a "master" may be the voice that opens III. The poem enters a dialogic mode, almost a drama from poem II to III. The questioner reacts to the previous speaker as though from a different voice, a different consciousness:

> <u>From where?</u> the voice asks coldly.
>
> This is the voice in cold morning air
> that pierces dreams. <u>From where does your strength come?</u>
>
> Old things...
> <u>From where does your strength come, you Southern Jew?</u>
> <u>split at the root, raised in a castle of air?</u>

> Yes. I expected this. I have known for years
> the question was coming.

This poem begins the interrogation of her personal, national, cultural, and political experiences. Rich is required to answer the question so coldly asked. A past self with the voice of an old poem speaks here, and Rich, in her own "I," responds as though she hears the questions for the first time. In the earlier writing, from a poem she called "Readings of History" (1960), Rich describes herself as "Split at the root, neither Gentile nor Jew,/ Yankee nor Rebel."[53] Her easy affirmation of an inner self ("This is from where/ my strength comes") is made dramatically difficult and complex by the specific naming of "you" in "you Southern Jew." The demand to know the self comes from the self, from the written self of the old poems as well as the named selves of the split identities.

The self-reflexivity in III is made more intense and available in IV. There the self as a written presence is made explicit and the engagement with self in and as a process in poetry is spoken:

> <u>With whom do you believe your lot is cast?</u>
> <u>From where does your strength come?</u>
>
> I think somehow, somewhere
> every poem of mine must repeat those questions
>
> which are not the same. There is a <u>whom</u>, a <u>where</u>

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[53] Rich, "Readings of History" (1960), in <u>Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law</u> (New York: Norton, 1967) 36-40. See also "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982), in <u>Blood, Bread, and Poetry</u>, 1986.

that is not chosen that is given and sometimes
falsely given

in the beginning we grasp whatever we can
to survive

The opening lines of IV, italicized like the other insertions from earlier poems, appears in "The Spirit of Place" (1980).[54] The stanza there reads, "With whom do you believe your lot is cast?/ If there's a conscience in these hills/ it hurls that question." Earlier, in "Natural Resources" (1977), the line appears as an assertion: "I have to cast my lot with those/ who age after age, perversely,// with no extraordinary power,/ reconstitute the world."[55] The re-cyclings of lines and questions and histories, and the complex reading of them, and re-reading Rich requires in her self-referentiality, makes the questions and assertions vital in the processes of re-writing. Like Rich's examination of her memories, the re-writing speaks re-vision. The two questions ("from where?" "with whom?") are linked, both in their present context and in their presence in "every poem" even those where they exist only implicitly. Rich's assertion of their presence, even when unspoken, makes the current they carry strong. They are not the same question every time, and they are not the same as each other. With whom one's lot is cast and from where one's strength comes may have different answers, Rich implies, different sources. The realization that sometimes one is

[54] "The Spirit of Place," The Fact of a Doorframe, 298.
[55] "Natural Resources," The Fact of A Doorframe, 264.

helpless, having to take what "is given," lies in sharp distinction from the earlier lines asserting the active choice to cast one's lot, to make an ally. The problem of power and powerlessness enters here with the absence of choice. As the "I" here shifts to "we" ("in the beginning we grasp whatever we can/ to survive"), the "you" addressed in the questions also shifts: Rich is no longer speaking only to or of her self, but implicates all of us in the process of knowing and taking responsibility for knowledge. She knows that for any reader, as for herself, immediate strategies of survival are not always enduring.

Revision, then, is the process through this elaborate poem. Her need to answer those questions, "from where" and "with whom," make the process from the present moment of writing, on a journey back to look for something, not a cure, but a solution to that puzzle. That is, the process of this writing of self answers the questions demanded by the desire to survive and to understand survival. No chronology exists here, nor linearity. The specific sense of herself in "that dangerous place/ the family home" where the child appears "backed silent against the wall/ trying to keep her eyes dry; haughty; in panic" (XIII) lives alongside another image of the child:

> The faithful drudging child
> the child at the oak desk whose penmanship,
> hard work, style will win her prizes
> becomes the woman with a mission, not to win prizes
> but to change the laws of history.
> How she gets this mission

is not clear. . . . (XX)

The puzzle of herself, her sense of having a "mission," or the "outrageous thing," "to believe one has a 'destiny'" (XV), is part of the strength Rich wishes to name. Rich wants to know or discover (or create in the writing) the process of how "she" becomes "the woman with a mission . . . to change the laws of history" (XX). Her look is "the bomb that rips/ the family home apart" (XIV) and her perception must be understood as the explosive force transforming her from the "faithful drudging child" to the "woman with a mission."

Rich grapples with "how the boundaries of perfection/ explode, leaving her cheekbone grey with smoke/ a piece of her hair singed off. . . ." The "boundaries of perfection" do not dissolve in soft mists. And although what has happened is clear, how is not. Rich makes a tenuous suggestion, one that frames itself as mere possibility:

> Say that she grew up in a house
> with talk of books, ideal societies--
> she is gripped by a blue, a foreign air
> a desert absolute: dragged by the roots of her own
> will into another scene of choices (XX).

With the word "Say" we must realize Rich's shrug at the impossibility of solid explanation. However, the person "split at the root" is linked organically to another aspect of "root"--the "roots of her own will." "Will" is ambivalent--is it the mover or the moved? There is a change here from the earlier assertion that "in the beginning we

grasp whatever we can/ to survive" (IV) to the hopefulness of "another scene of choices." The figure of "roots" in this poem, usually an image of fixity, stability, sources, and origins, is here mobile. Rich's other images of "roots" are also unstable. She is "split at the root" (III), her father's "rootless ideology" (VI) dominated her vision, and she says, "The Jews I've felt rooted among/ are those who were turned to smoke" (XVI). It is the "roots of her own will" (no one else's) that force movement from the safety of the boundaries of perfection, detonate that explosive device, and leave her with her hair singed but with the possibility of choice. The "woman with a mission" is thus, in part, her own creation, as her own will drags her to a consciousness of differences, a place of responsibility. Yet that view is only a possibility, not a certainty. Possibility acts as a net cast, as imagination gathers whatever energies might be accessible.

She wonders "Are there spirits in me, diaspora-driven/ that wanted to lodge somewhere" (IX) and later returns to the question:

> And has any of this to do with how
> Mohawk or Wampanoag knew it?
>
> is the passion I connect with in this air
> trace of the original
>
> existences that knew this place
> is the region still trying to speak with them
>
> is this light a language
> the shudder of this aspen-grove a way

of sending messages
the white mind barely intercepts

are signals also coming back
from the vast diaspora

of the people who kept their promises
as a way of life? (XII)

Whatever possibilities of sources exist and are considered, Rich imprints the consciousness of her Jewishness. The word "diaspora" in "the diaspora of the stars," for example, is the reminder of dispersal of a people and of an original dispersal of the natural universe (XII, IX and XXI). From the reading of photographs of "the old Ashkenazi life" and their inevitable reminder of "the place where history was meant to stop/ but does not stop. . . . where the pattern was meant to give way at last/ but only/ becomes a different pattern" (XVIII), Rich moves to other patterns: "They say such things are stored/ in the genetic code--. . . . a mystic biology?--// I think of the women who sailed to Palestine/ . . . carrying the broken promises/ of Zionism in their hearts// along with the broken promises/ of communism, anarchism--" (XIX). The natural world, political and ethnic history, the holocaust, the old stories, and the patterns built into her genetic codes are all written here as Rich's language of self-hood.

The direct source of her Jewishness, her father, is addressed as connection and as dislocation. Rich speaks of him: "I saw my father building/ his rootless ideology// his private castle in air// in that most dangerous place, the

family home/ we were the chosen people" (VI). But she also speaks to him directly, as "you," in an urgent prose form:

> For years I struggled with you: your categories, your theories, your will, the cruelty which came inextricable from your love. For years all arguments I carried on in my head were with you. I saw myself, the eldest daughter raised as a son. . . . the eldest daughter in a house with no son, she who must overthrow the father, take what he taught her and use it against him. All this in a castle of air, the floating world of the assimilated who know and deny they will always be aliens.
>
> After your death I met you again as the face of patriarchy, could name at last precisely the principle you embodied. . . . I saw the power and the arrogance of the male as your true watermark; I did not see beneath it the suffering of the Jew, the alien stamp you bore, because you had deliberately arranged that it should be invisible to me. It is only now, under a powerful, womanly lens, that I can decipher your suffering and deny no part of my own. (VII)

To take the place of rootlessness and reinscribe it as a source is the effect of Rich's re-writing. To assimilate is simultaneously to know and to deny one's connections of history, blood, and community, that is, the source of one's strength. It is to cast one's lot falsely. Rich makes her mirror plain to us: "I saw myself" she repeats, and to have seen herself in "a castle of air" is to have lived in her father's private reality, his "private castle of air." For Rich, as one of her father's "chosen people," the terrible irony of assimilation has meant choosing isolation and alienation. Rich marks her hunger for connection for community and for family (that is, for sameness and difference from her father) in another address to him, also in prose, in which she speaks of her husband:

> But there was also the other Jew. The one you most feared . . . . from the wrong part of history. . . . The one who said, as if he had memorized the formula, There's nothing left now but the food and the humor. The one who, like you, ended isolate, who had tried to move in the floating world of the assimilated who know and deny they will always be aliens. Who drove to Vermont in a rented car at dawn and shot himself. For so many years I had thought you and he were in opposition. I needed your unlikeness then; now it's your likeness that stares me in the face. There is something more than food, humor, a turn of phrase, a gesture of the hands: there is something more." (XVII)

These prose passages make Rich's words to her father (and later to her husband) seem less wrought, less performed, than the poetry. The directness feels loose, the form tentative. We feel that Rich is allowing us to overhear parts of these private conversations in order to emphasize how much of her subjectivity is in fact comprised of connections with others, and how, to speak with such intensity with her father and her husband, she exposes utterly her "impurity" as a politically correct lesbian feminist.[56]

Seen as another site of choice, the apparently abrupt shifts to prose and into direct speech become intelligible. When Rich speaks to her husband (XXII) she begins with explanation, almost with apology, outlining the difference between speaking with him and with her father (with whom she had "a kind of rhetoric going"). She opens,

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[56] That the limitations of "the correct line" distress Rich is apparent in "North American Time," in which she says, "When my dreams showed signs/ of becoming/ politically correct/ . . . then I began to wonder" (33).

> I have resisted this for years, writing to you as if you could hear me. . . . I've had a sense of protecting your existence, not using it merely as a theme for poetry or tragic musings. . . . The living, writers especially, are terrible projectionists. I hate the way they use the dead.
>
> Yet I can't finish this without speaking to you, not simply of you. You knew there was more than food and humor. . . .

Rich gives a sensuous description of the food, "The deep crevices of black pumpernickel . . . the sweet butter and red onions . . . bowls of sour cream mixed with cut radishes, cucumber, scallions. . . ." Life is tasted here and enjoyed, and the terrible loss we feel in this intimate conversation over these loved dishes makes sentimentality impossible. There is a kind of craziness in this writing to a dead man as though Rich were speaking, as though he could hear her. She has been reluctant to reconstruct him, wishing, she explains to him, to let "you dwell in the minds of those who have reason to miss you, in your way or in their way, not mine." Rich asserts the power of this writing to displace other ways of missing him, and her comments point to the absence of this man in life and his presence in her writings. She acknowledges his link with her as a source or a connection to the most profound aspects of her life. That she feels compelled to "recreate" him in words now is part of her need to "finish this." Drawing together the parts--silenced, invisible, partly felt, partly remembered or dreamed--all are aspects of the answer to her question: "From where does your strength come?" She uses

the dead here to inscribe a suppressed part of her life, and thus to affirm herself. Rich reconnects with the past and with her present need to strengthen her own present self. She gives her reasons:

> That's why I want to speak to you now. To say: no person, trying to take responsibility for her or his identity, should have to be so alone. There must be those among whom we can sit down and weep, and still be counted as warriors. (I make up this strange, angry packet for you, threaded with love.) I think you thought there was no such place for you, and perhaps there was none then, and perhaps there is none now; but we will have to make it, we who want an end to suffering, who want to change the laws of history, if we are not to <u>give ourselves away</u> (XXII).

The simple directness of this seems transparent, but she makes them allies with the "we" and that suggests reconciliation and the realization of common struggles. Yet, the parenthesis of self-reflexivity makes us wonder about this "strange packet"--and feel self-conscious about overhearing these words. Nevertheless, the message is general: those trying to take responsibility for changing the world and for their own identities are warriors of a sort and need comrades. Without "such a place," without making it exist, we are likely "<u>to give ourselves away</u>". These italicized words suggest various meanings: to expose or reveal our secrets to those who wish to perpetuate the "laws of history"; to kill ourselves as her husband did; or perhaps to submit to definitions of self we have not made. The peculiar sense that they come from some unacknowledged source, not, in my researches, traceable, makes the words

shimmer with the possibilities of other contexts. Rich is urgent in this conversation. The lack of connection, and the requirement to make it, is now, as it was in her husband's time, a life-and-death issue.

The last poem in this group (though not the last piece --Rich concludes Sources in prose) returns to her present moment, her recollection of the past and the choices she made then, and to the interior voice that speaks to her as "you" and seems to pierce dreams (II, XXI) with its knowledge:

> Sixteen years ago I sat in this northeast kingdom
> reading Gilbert White's Natural History
> of Selborne thinking
> I can never know this land I walk upon
> as that English priest knew his
> --a comparable piece of earth--
> rockledge soil insect bird weed tree
>
> I will never know it so well because . . .
>
> Because you have chosen
> something else: to know other things
> even the cities which
> create of this a myth
>
> Because you grew up in a castle of air
> disjunctured
>
> Because without a faith
> you are faithful (XXIII)

The poem makes its circle of self-knowledge, returning to the site of returns. Rich's specific memory of reading a resource book of natural history in a place that was itself a recognized source of knowledge (the earth with its simple nouns) is part of her return to old landscapes to look for

sources. By attributing the institutional power of "kingdom" and "priest" to the contained texts of "Natural History," Rich undermines that kind and condition of knowledge, that authority which she will never know over a "piece of earth."[57] The understanding she had sixteen years before is intelligible to her now. She can now complete the "because. . . ." The italicized voice is firm and clear: "Because you have chosen/ something else." The line break makes the point of difference. The openness of the second line, "something else: to know other things," suggests the freedom that choice brings, even the freedom of a destructive environment (the cities that make a "piece of earth" a myth). The second "Because" is the scene of loss, not of choice--Rich will never totally know the land she walks upon because she grew up "in a castle of air." Of course, the implications are multiple: though she sits reading in a "northeast kingdom," she has no natural "castle" in that kingdom, because of her father's "disjunctured" relationship to the earth and to his own people. In the final explanation, Rich dissociates herself from the knowledge of the "English priest." She can never know the land "so well" because she lacks the "faith" that would grant her authority over it. The last broken line of

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[57] See Marilyn Frye's essay, "The Arrogant Eye" in The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1983). Frye says, "With this world view, men see with arrogant eyes which organize everything with reference to themselves . . ." (67).

explanation takes a leap of logic: the condition of being "without a faith" as a possession, as an organizing principle of belief, does not undermine the possibility of being "faithful." She asserts the value or the possibility of fidelity for its own sake. The "faithful drudging child" is reinvoked, but this time, as the challenging, aggressive voice gives answers rather than asks questions, she appears in the full affirmation of choices, of self-acceptance.

The final section of Sources is unnumbered, in prose, a direct address to any person reading, and perhaps, to herself writing, though here Rich is only "I"--no insightful or challenging other (speaking to Rich as "you") is present:

> I have wished I could rest among the beautiful and common weeds I can name, both here and in other tracts of the globe. But there is no finite knowing, no such rest. Innocent birds, deserts, morning-glories, point to choices, leading away from the familiar. When I speak of an end to suffering I don't mean anesthesia. I mean knowing the world, and my place in it, not in order to stare with bitterness or detachment, but as a powerful and womanly series of choices: and here I write the words, in their fullness:
> powerful; womanly.
>
> August 1981--
> August 1982

In the first of these poems, Rich names beautiful and common weeds, but in this poem as a writing of her life, "finite knowing" is a "rest," a "cure," and she has refused to rest on a "heal-all." Instead she reads the natural history of nature as a sign or scene of choice. The "familiar" feels safe, feels habitual, feels like forgetfulness. Rest, familiarity and anesthesia are set against memory and choice

and desire here. The recurrence of "powerful" and "womanly" takes us back again, this time to her first address to her father: "It is only now, under a powerful, womanly lens, that I can decipher your suffering and deny no part of my own" (VII).[58] The seeing-through-a-lens is clarified. The poem itself is a kind of "lens" through which she can focus her gaze, and the process of writing the poem has brought her to "now." She does not gaze with "detachment" or "bitterness," but rather is present as a way of knowing and a responsiblity, finding herself in a "series of choices." We recall her location in a United States built on violence, her sense of alienation from the people who "need never ponder difference," who "kill others for being who they are/ or where they are" (X). In these last words, however, Rich marks the gathering place, her writing. Realizing difference means having choices and making choices--these two are what is necessary to change the laws of history and to bring an "end to suffering." The final line reads, "and here I write the words, in their fullness: Powerful;

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[58] Rich footnotes that "the phrase 'an end to suffering' was evoked by a sentence in Nadine Gordimer's Burger's Daughter: 'No one knows where the end of suffering will begin.'" This is a complex insertion. The line first appears in XXII, in Rich's address to her dead husband, as "we who want an end to suffering, who want to change the laws of history." Its recurrence in the last piece is referential, and she explains her earlier words. Of course, the context of Gordimer's writing, the revolutionary struggle in South Africa as fact of contemporary life, and its literary existence in a novel about a daughter's relationship to her father's expectations, make Rich's "pointing to choices" explicitly political.

womanly." Rich insists on the reality that "here I write the words" is an aspect of "knowing the world and [her] place in it." Repetition of "powerful" and "womanly" as part of the "series of choices" makes those words in their separateness and their necessary relationship to each other an inscription of the sources Rich has found within herself, in her world, and in her words.

"Contradictions: Tracking Poems"[59] reframes that world and that "self," as Rich in a collection of twenty-nine numbered poems presents her country, bound to a cold war, "wedged fast in history/ stuck in the ice" (2) and herself in it, grappling with the physical pain of crippling arthritis, worn by "this battering blunt-edged life" (1). The selves written in these poems are deeply troubled. The terrific energy that enlivens Rich as she composes an identity out of fragments is grim here. Difficult integrations that were sustained by conviction and discovery earlier, in "Contradictions" seem rawer, more resistant to hope. The poems themselves (though it is not my intention to make a serious comparison) seem more tautly strung between direct speech (what Altieri describes as her aim "to make poetic language a clear mode of discourse")[60] and poetic distance--evoked by

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[59] Rich, "Contradictions: Tracking Poems," in Your Native Land, Your Life, 83-111. References to these twenty-nine poems will be by number and will appear in the text.

[60] Charles Altieri, Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry, 20.

Rich's use of conventions (such as the apostrophe). Rich layers her most intimate selves with her perceptions of the bleak and violent context of the United States. She writes her body in its joyous lovemaking--"My mouth hovers across your breasts/ in the short grey winter afternoon" (3)--and in its humiliating and crippling pain. She uses the words of other women (He slammed his hand across my face and I/ let him do that until I stopped letting him do it/ so I'm in for life [4]) and exposes her imaginative identifications with other women. In these poems she often speaks directly to the reader, not with passionate exhortations but with warning, and in sorrow for herself as a writer and for the community of which she is part.

"Contradictions: Tracking Poems" is not the writing of despair, I think, because Rich is still speaking, still urgent in her desire for connection. Her writing of self continues to be the site of possibility for her, whatever the dimensions of anguish she takes on. She speaks "the problem":

> The problem, unstated till now, is how
> to live in a damaged body
> in a world where pain is meant to be gagged
> uncured un-grieved-over The problem is
> to connect, without hysteria, the pain
> of any one's body with the pain of the body's world
> For it is the body's world
> they are trying to destroy forever (18).

Her body, "any one's body," and "the body's world" are connected in consciousness of pain. To deny that pain,

to gag it, is part of the same silencing that makes the destruction of the world possible.[61]

The effects of this "problem" are everywhere in "Contradictions." The issue of how to "live" with it is the question of how to take on the connections, and indeed, of how to live with pain in one's body and in the body's world. The fact of contradictions in this struggle is the problem that Rich cautions us not to forget: "Don't let the solstice fool you" (1), she warns. Even spring can be dangerous, and the seasons participate in the "stew of contradictions" (1) that our lives will always be.[62] Against the "[h]eart of cold. Bones of cold. Scalp of cold/ . . . . The freezing people/ of a freezing nation eating/ luxury food or garbage/ . . . . My country" (2), Rich places herself with her lover, speaking to her with the heat of passion, "so hot with joy we amaze ourselves/ . . . . my love hot on your scent on the cusp of winter" (3). This is the primary contradiction--the women's passion in the frozen

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[61] Audre Lorde's conflict with those who wished to gag her pain with the pretense of a false breast demonstrates Rich's point.

[62] Readers of the first poem will certainly think of Eliot's The Waste Land: Rich reminds us that "April is the cruelest month," in her warning that "the worst moment of winter can come in April" (1), and when she says, "our bodies/ plod on without conviction" (1) we may think "I had not thought death had undone so many." Her presence and personal engagement with the wasteland of cold and pain in which she finds herself, however, make this poem diverge profoundly from Eliot's. See T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land, in The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952) 37-55.

waste of contemporary life. The generalized wretchedness ("frozen tongues licking") is intensified as the specific joy is juxtaposed against the italicized voices of victims of male power (". . . he kept saying I was crazy, he'd lock me up" [4]). Circling closer, into the spiral of misery, Rich carries her imagination into lives that are both like and unlike her own.

Poem 5 gives us damaged women. Rich's precise identification with them, her difference from them, and her sense of a commonality that the externals hide make the written self a blurring of possibility and identity:

> She is carrying my madness and I dread her
> avoid her when I can
> She walks along I.S. 93 howling
> in her bare feet
> She is number 6375411
> in a cellblock in Arkansas
> and I dread what she is paying for that is mine
> She has fallen asleep at last in the battered
> women's safe-house and I dread
> her dreams that I also dream
> If never I become exposed or confined like this
> what am I hiding
> O sister of nausea of broken ribs of isolation
> what is this freedom I protect how is it mine

Rich undermines the idea of "self" as a private, individual, separate and independent. Other women carry Rich's madness, pay for indeterminate crimes, share her dreadful dreams. The common horrors are not suffered in common, and Rich is filled with "dread" of the women, the guilt, the dreams--and of her hidden self. Her question, "what am I hiding," implies that if she were not hiding some part of herself she would be "exposed or confined" (a nice contradiction) like

the women whose condition she dreads. Her invocation to the lost women, "O sister of nausea of broken ribs of isolation," is an ironic echo of desperate women's prayers to powerful saints and a formalizing gesture of poetic apostrophe to the muse. The most damaged beings have the authority of experience and are a source of self-consciousness for Rich. The invocation extends the question, "what is this freedom I protect." To wish freedom from exposure and freedom from confinement implies the need to hide, which is another kind of confinement, and to know of that need, another kind of exposure. Rich interrogates the "freedom," not its substance--the list of sisters ("of nausea," "of broken ribs," "of isolation)" makes "freedom from" graphic--but its relation to her. As she has thought earlier of "what she is paying for that is mine," she asks of the freedom, "how is it mine." The movement of the question is again double. If she is hiding, how is she free? And if she could bear the same afflictions as the others, or if they are suffering for her, or as she would be were she "exposed" or "confined," then in what way has she a right to that freedom? Possession of "freedom" and of identity here is undermined, as the conditions of life (madness, imprisonment, violence), and the stuff of self-hood, cross the boundaries of individual identity. Rich's use of the conditional and of the process of being ("If never I become exposed") makes "confinement," "exposure,"

and "freedom" all part of possibilities to which she is vulnerable. Her final question ("how is it mine") is left without punctuation, without closure, like all the sense of possibility and identity aroused here.

From the attention outward for self-knowledge, Rich moves to an odd dialogue, naming two "Adriennes" as "I." The poems numbered "6" and "7" are an exchange of letters from "Adrienne" to "Adrienne." Both poems work as a writing of self, making the complex issues of subjecthood peculiar:

Dear Adrienne:

I'm calling you up tonight
as I might call up a friend as I might call up a ghost
To ask what you intend to do
with the rest of your life. Sometimes you act
as if you have all the time there is.
I worry about you when I see this.
The prime of life, old age
aren't what they used to be;
making a good death isn't either,
now you can walk around the corner of a wall
and see a light
that has already blown your past away.
Somewhere in
Boston beautiful literature
is being read around the clock
by writers to signify
their dislike of this.
I hope you've got something in mind.
I hope you have some idea
about the rest of your life.

In sisterhood,

Adrienne (6)

This poem/"letter" is followed by another:

Dear Adrienne,

I feel signified by pain
from my breastbone through my left shoulder down

through my elbow into my wrist is a thread of pain
I am typing this instead of writing by hand
because my wrist on the right side
blooms and rushes with pain
like a neon bulb
You ask me how I'm going to live
the rest of my life
Well, nothing is predictable with pain
Did the old poets write of this?
---in its odd spaces, free,
many have sung and battled---
But I'm already living the rest of my life
not under conditions of my choosing
wired into pain
rider on the slow train

Yours, Adrienne (7)

The "I" that Ostriker says refers to the writer's self[63] here is problematized to an extraordinary degree. The poet writes to her self (to "Adrienne") about her concerns for her; "Adrienne" then answers "Adrienne" explaining to her how she is going to live. Throughout this exchange each "I" is and is not the other, and each "Adrienne" is and is not the Adrienne whose name is on the cover and whose photo is on the back of the book. All are manifestations of "I," of self, of "Adrienne Rich" and of Adrienne Rich. These selves work together as subject (agent) and subject (topic). The letter/poem device is a device, the names used are tropes or figures (likely both), and the question-answer method is a technique. Yet, despite (or because of) the tense craftedness of these poems and their play into and with each other, another kind of autography is enacted here.

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[63] Ostriker, Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America, 12.

The peculiar formality of this exchange, and the mixing of forms within it--the salutation of a letter, then the contradictory assertion "I'm calling you up"--make the epistolary form clearly a formality, almost a performance. What is being performed, here, is absence. One rarely writes to a present friend, and the Adrienne who writes to Adrienne must be somehow separate/apart from her. The "I" and the "you" are thus conventionalized as self and other. But this other is the same as self, to the extent that the name is shared, and this conversation must be seen as a self given distinct voices, or whose distinct voices are formalized and detached from the cacophony of varied selves all speaking at once.

Following the salutation (of "6")--note the formal colon after the greeting--another kind of absence and another kind of performance are suggested. Indeed, two kinds of performance are enacted figuratively: following the opening epistolary move, a conversational gambit suggests an invocation, or a telephone call. "Adrienne" speaks: "I'm calling you up tonight"--the "you" is neither friend nor ghost but reached for by technological or magical conjuring. Such calls cannot be refused. The "calling up" that Adrienne in "6" is doing of some other Adrienne, one she addresses "In sisterhood," is thus both the most ordinary and the most extraordinary of events. No oddity, other than that of ghostliness, is suggested and the tone is

concerned and detached. This "I" observes and worries, linking the social/political/poetical/historical context with her concern. This "Adrienne" is sensible and cautionary, a big sister's disembodied voice whose attention is on the other Adrienne. Only the last lines reveal some urgency. In them the issue of "what you intend to do/ with the rest of your life" makes the repetition of "I hope" convey some strength of feeling.

The answering poem/letter is fixed and centered in the immediate, physical experience of pain. In an ironic echo of the Boston readers of "beautiful literature" who wish "to signify" their dislike of change, this Adrienne speaks of feeling "signified by pain." To be "signified" suggests both "indicated" and "made significant." Her response begins in the body, and in feeling precisely the track of pain and its effects in the present moment. The effect is specifically felt in the writing of the present moment which is determined by the "bloom[s] and rush[es] of pain in the right wrist." From her descriptive, informing, and self-asserting opening, she acknowledges Adrienne's question, "You ask me how I'm going to live/ the rest of my life," and conversationally answers it: "Well, nothing is predictable with pain." Her self-conscious connection to the practice and to the feelings of "the old poets" and their reactions to pain reaffirms her as a poet and yet distances her from the present writing: "Did the old poets write of this?/--

in its odd spaces, free,/ many have sung and battled--." Pain is nothing new to poets. It is in its "odd spaces," its absences, that poets can fight or sing. This musing is quickly dropped, and the feeling of a person speaking in response to "Adrienne"'s letter opens again: "But I'm already living the rest of my life." The abstractions and generalities of the common question "what you intend to do . . ." are suggested as superficial, as vague, as merely mental configurations. The questioning Adrienne looks for some reassurance that Adrienne has "something in mind," "some idea" about what to do, while the answering Adrienne takes the question into the body, and into the writing. In the writing, and as she writes, she is "already living the rest of [her] life." Earlier she spoke with terrible specificity; now she generalizes her experience of how she is living: "not under conditions of my choosing/ wired into pain." Finally, the "neon"-linked, the "wired" and "threaded" images of pain give way to a figure in which the whole body is tracked, not in control, a "rider on the slow train." Life, then, is not an "idea" even in a poem. The "how" of living and the doing of it collapse here into the hand typing, not writing, and it is this particularity of the body's presence that makes us feel that <u>this</u> poem, "7," is the voice of Adrienne Rich herself, while the other voice feels like "Adrienne," more than a mobile trope, but living on a simpler plane of language and feeling.

Like Audre Lorde's insistence on myriad selves, Rich's poems here speak the different voices of self in their differing intensities and patterns. In both, Adrienne speaks to Adrienne about Adrienne and our sense of the differences between them is informative: it is nothing so crude as the thinking self against the feeling self, rather it is a layering effect, the selves separated both by the division into two poems, but also by the focus on the embodied self of "7." It is her life that is being scrutinized in both poems. She is the Adrienne who speaks herself.

The self who speaks as a poet is part of the language of contradiction. She speaks both to and about the reader. And in the reader, too, contradiction must be tracked. Some readers take Rich as a scriptural voice, finding words for "everything"; others, the ones for whom she writes, are constructs of her desire to be understood and engaged with, not submitted to. Many readers must wish to be the one for whom she writes--her distinction is an instruction. Despite the difference she establishes between the two kinds of readers, she wishes to be seen by both:

> You who think I find words for everything,
> and you for whom I write this,
> how can I show you what I'm barely
> coming into possession of, invisible luggage
> of more than fifty years. . . . (15)

Her personal possessions come around, leaving her feeling "obsessed, peculiar, longing," (15) yet at the same time as

she becomes aware of possession, Rich admits, "It's true, these last few years I've lived/ watching myself in the act of loss" (16). The contradiction of gain and loss is uneasily tracked in language. She says there is "no art to this but anger" (16). The difficulty of showing what is gained and the rejection of artfulness in loss seem to parallel another frustration with language, with poetry:

> This valley itself: one more contradiction
> the paradise fields the brute skyscrapers
> the pesticidal wells
>
> I have been wanting for years
> to write a poem equal to these
> material forces
> and I have always failed
> I wasn't looking for a muse
> only a reader by whom I could not be mistaken (20)

The failure is in the writing and in the reader. To "write a poem equal to these/ material forces" is to eliminate the possibility of a single idea taking hold. The material forces contain their contradictions. The poem must too, and must resist the single idea. She says, "Trapped in one idea, you can't have your feelings,/ feelings are always about more than one thing" (13). The desire to find a perfect reader (no misreading even possible) and the desire to write the poem "equal" to "material forces" engage the same failure. Rich seems wry here, with "only a reader." The poem to equal the material world and the reader to equal the poem are both constructions in the peculiar overlap of words and "concrete" reality.

Rich closes these "Tracking Poems" with another articulation of difference in readers:

> You who think I find words for everything
> this is enough for now
> cut it short cut loose from my words
>
> You for whom I write this
> in the night hours when the wrecked cartilage
> sifts round the mystical jointure of the bones
> when the insect of detritus crawls
> from shoulder to elbow to wristbone
> remember: the body's pain and the pain on the streets
> are not the same but you can learn
> from the edges that blur O you who love clear edges
> more than anything watch the edges that blur (29)

The emancipation of the reader who thinks that Rich "can find words for everything" is a liberation for Rich, too. She informs, "this is enough for now" and instructs, "cut loose from my words." Such readers believe that "everything" can be named, yet Rich dreams of letters "in a language/ I know to be English but cannot understand" (14). Those readers cannot see more than the words, mistaking them for "everything." The reader for whom she writes, the one to whom she speaks the pain of her "wrecked cartilage," is told to notice difference between the body's pain and the "pain on the streets" but also that the distinction between them is not absolute. Rich informs, "you can learn from the edges that blur." Then she exhorts, with a rhetorical apostrophe, "O you who love clear edges/ . . . . watch the edges that blur." The place of blurring is the overlap that makes for contradiction. To watch those blurred edges is to track them closely, to learn from them.

The written selves in Sources, "Contradictions: Tracking Poems" and the essays, all written within the last decade, articulate the identity of blurred edges, in which the interior and the exterior, the past and the present, are not the same, but overlap, and the pain of another is not one's own pain, but engages one. Rich seems to have been involved in this process for a long time. Helen Vendler says of reading Rich's first book of poems, "I read it in almost disbelieving wonder; someone my age was writing down my life."[64] Adrienne Rich, in writing herself, involves all who find the boundaries between Rich, her world, and our own a place where the edges blur.

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[64] Helen Vendler, "Adrienne Rich," in Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) 237.

Chapter Four: "our dead behind us":[1] Kate Millett's The Basement

I

Writing the feminist self has brought us to a multiplicity of selves, to the various discourses engaged somehow within the one skin that Rich calls "identity." The (American) feminist effort is to give speech to the various selves, in particular to those not sanctioned in this culture--the lesbian, the Jew, the woman of colour--and to engage in the elaboration of a subjecthood that cannot be (nor does it desire to be) reduced to a single unit(y). The writer of a feminist self is the producer as well as the product of the understanding/belief/ethos/realization that, for this historical and cultural moment--this intersection of the political and the personal--to fix on a self and to say THIS, THIS is my Real Self would be to paralyse the dynamic of feminist subjecthood, just as to assert that this or that manifesto is the doctrine of feminism would be to negate the logic of liberation and movement both.[2]

Just as boundaries within the self are permeable, allowing various voices to speak, so in some feminist

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[1] Audre Lorde, "Sisters in Arms" in Our Dead Behind Us (New York: Norton, 1986) 3-5. The line reads, "and we left our dead behind us."

[2] Note the "Psychanalyse et Politique" group in France registering the French phrase for "Women's Liberation Movement" and thereby legally able to prevent other women from using it. See Stephen Heath, "Male Feminism" in Men in Feminism, eds. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York and London: Methuen, 1987) 22.

writing, the boundaries between self and other are written-over--a new landscape of self inscribed as (an) other is established. This may be a commonplace in fiction where characters and situations are easily acknowledged as "autobiographical"--representatives of a writer's self or experience. In non-fiction prose, we often expect the lines of personal identity to be more clearly drawn. For feminists, however (as Adrienne Rich demonstrates), the writer's consciousness of herself as a woman makes that line between self and other, at times, disappear. The feminist writer is conscious of being vulnerable to experiences, embedded in the gendered system of this culture, which are often violent and seemingly inexplicable. The feminist autography of Kate Millett enacts her belief that recognizing a common condition of identity with those whose seem utterly alien can offer ways to understand our culture stifled by careful distinctions between self and other.

In Kate Millett's The Basement: Meditations on a Human Sacrifice[3] the feminist self is present in a troubling array of agencies, voices, and subjectivities. Millett speaks here in her "own" voice, familiar to us from her other writing, as "I," placing her particular experience in the foreground of a writing that layers the self with horror. The Basement is a detailed account of the torture and murder

[3] Kate Millett, The Basement: Meditations on a Human Sacrifice (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979). Subsequent references to this book will appear in the text.

of a sixteen-year-old girl by a woman and a group of teenagers. Millett's book gives us her relationship to the story of Sylvia Likens' death, transcript pages of the trial of Gertrude Baniszewski and her followers, and the testimony of Sylvia's younger sister, Jenny, who had been boarded with Sylvia at Gertrude's while their parents followed a carnival. Millett's thoughts or "meditations" about what happened, how, and why, and her relentless drive (characteristic of all her writing) toward self-knowledge and self exposure[4] make her feminist reading of this crime and its "meaning" a writing of the self. Of course, no one not a feminist can find out what it means, why it happened. The discourse or rhetoric of female evil/guilt and female reparation and expiation must be exposed as a patriarchal language internalized by the "characters" before the logic of Sylvia's death and of Kate Millett's obsession, and of this text's necessary presence in this study can be clear. Joyce Carol Oates, for example, whose characters are impelled by the most demented motives or subjected to bizarre torments from inexplicable sources, reviewed this book with indignation at the criminals and the neighbours who did nothing to rescue Sylvia. Her understanding is limited to seeing Gertrude and the others as "moral imbeciles"--as though they tortured Sylvia for months

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[4] For Millett it seems that to write the self is to become a self--true in both Flying (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974) and Sita (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977).

because they didn't know any better. She seems to want to separate herself very much from Millett, declaring that she cannot imagine how anyone with a PhD, a job, and books published can say, as Millett does, "I am Sylvia Likens." Oates ignores Millett's process of making herself (and her reader) Sylvia, and Gertrude and Jenny. In this text we, as readers, are drawn and revised, written as ourselves, with the qualities and capacities of the characters.[5] Oates refuses the connections, hoping (piously, considering the tormented imagination that is revealed in her novels) that Millett can ascend from the basement.[6]

The book speaks in the voices of liberal reason and feminist insight, and in the interior (fictional) voices of the victim and her tormentors. Millett speaks to us (as female and male readers), to herself and to them, and she speaks for them. She makes herself them and finds them in herself, she holds up mirrors fragmenting our own harmonies, and she undoes her creations, exposing the fictions, and her own fears and desires that inform them. She exposes the

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[5] Millett makes her "reader" a flexible entity. She assumes a common culture, though she does not address race (is this a "white" crime?), and she seems to speak to a group of women and men, having, for instance, childhood games in common, but different roles within them. At times, the "we" she uses is explicitly female. Male readers, then, must become conscious of a parallel reality to their own, and either "identify" with female terror or passivity or rage, or they must read as "outsiders"--this is a choice with which female readers are familiar. Because the major figures in the "story" are female, the individual male reader is never positioned as "actor" in the events.

[6] Joyce Carol Oates, Review of The Basement in The New York Times Book Review (9 September, 1979) 14.

great fiction that their interior lives/their selves, existed like her own (like ours, like those of readers and writers) in words. They exist only in her linguistic constructions of them; that is, our understanding of their experience comes through only Millett's words. Yet words were central to these people and to this horror--central to Sylvia who had the words "I am a prostitute and proud of it" carved into her abdomen with a hot needle, central to Gertrude who chose them. The body and its words, recreated in this text, were made real in the flesh: the body inscribed with its guilt: sex. But Sylvia Likens, the coroner's report proved, was a virgin, so her crime was not sexual action, but sexuality itself, and as female, in the discourse of her culture, sexuality is her self.

After the dedication to Sylvia Likens, before "Part One," The Basement opens with these words:

> On October twenty-sixth, 1965, in Indianapolis, Indiana, the starved body of a sixteen-year-old girl named Sylvia Likens was found in a back bedroom of Gertrude Baniszewski's house on New York Street, the corpse covered with bruises and the words "I am a prostitute and proud of it" carved upon the abdomen. Sylvia's parents had boarded her and her younger sister, Jenny Likens, with Gertrude in July. The beatings and abuse Sylvia suffered over the summer had increased so by September that the last weeks of her life were spent as a captive in the basement of the house. Gertrude Baniszewski was indicted for the murder, together with three of her teenage children and two neighborhood boys, Coy Hubbard and Richard Hobbs.

It is the first of the many repetitions of those facts, those names, those events.

The opening meditation, addressing Sylvia Likens, begins with an assertion of Millett's own repetitions: "In how many sad, yellow hotel rooms have I spoken to you, writing these words before me on the wall" (11). She writes of her fourteen-year "obsession" in which Sylvia Likens was a "story I told to friends . . . even to strangers" since her first encounter with Sylvia's story in a magazine. Millett's first gesture here is a linking one--of her self and Sylvia Likens. They "touch" with Millett's voice. Her obsession, her own circling repetitions are established immediately. That we already know the facts does not prevent Millett from repeating, "Your body had been hideously mutilated and with the words 'I am a prostitute and proud of it' engraved upon the abdomen" (11).

The specific, personal, private, idiosyncratic notion of her obsession that Millett establishes in the first paragraph she undoes in the second: "You have been with me ever since . . . a nightmare, my own nightmare . . . of growing up a female child, of becoming a woman in a world we have lost and where we are everywhere reminded of our defeat" (11). She investigates her own relation to Sylvia Likens as figure and as independent, historical person and brings into question the textual status of Sylvia Likens: "That you endured it at the hands of a woman, the hardest thing in the fable" (11). Millett requires us to know Sylvia Likens as dead girl in Indiana, and as representative

of female childhood in North America, 1965, and as "fable," as the fleshly echo of a literary tradition.

For Millett the story could not at first be re-told (told?) in words. She explains (addressing herself to Sylvia) that she sculpted cages, "the first series even done in a basement" (12), each cage "an oblique retelling of your story" (12). Millett's telling and retelling of this story suggest that Gertrude/Sylvia are the expression in the flesh of social hysteria--the suppression of and obsession with desire, guilt, and sex. The characters/people (both appear here) are representations of bodies with little access to language. Gertrude suffers from skin afflictions[7] and Sylvia from the cigarette burns, the scars, the words carved into her skin. And Kate Millett herself, with no access at first to words, builds cages, dozens of them, five series she tells us. Now a writer, the focussing lens of social obsession--the same social obsession that made Sylvia Likens this victim--, she speaks the forbidden desire of all who hear of such a "case": the 'sick' or at least conflicted desire to know, to understand, to imagine, to feel. To suppress that desire is to deny it language, and to deny the self its mirror. Yet, this is no Sadean "fable,"[8] in which sexual suppressions find a particularly dramatic outlet.

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[7] The disease of hysterics. See Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, The Newly Born Woman, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 34.

[8] One of the similarities may be the monotony. Roland Barthes says, "Sade is monotonous" in Sade/Fourier/Loyola, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976) 36;

The hysteric body of this text, inscribed compulsively in Sylvia Likens' torments and Kate Millett's identifications, is not only hysteric. It speaks rage as well as guilt and fear as well as desire. It interprets, analyses, integrates. Above all, it speaks with the language of the mind as well as that of the body. Its rhetoric/language(s) make a writing of self that incorporates self and other, victim and tormentor, reader and writer in an ethical articulation of feminist interrogations. With this mirror of the self and society, a fragmented one, Kate Millett takes us into common places of childhood--the games, the teasing, the bullying. She recalls us to the tying games, the basement games of sexual experimentation and the excitement of the games, "the waiting in the dark" (19) for the attack . . . the game that "trains" women for their role as passive victim.

And as Millett circles round herself, her moment of first meeting Sylvia Likens, her descriptions getting increasingly personal, specific, the personal embraces a larger being than the merely individual Kate Millett. We see Millett here as she sees herself retrospectively, reading about Sylvia Likens in a Time magazine, sitting in the canteen at Barnard College, describing her "sick fascination," her "horror," "anger," and fear: "The fear

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and the word Millett makes Sylvia repeat endlessly as she nears death is "monotony" (277). We might wonder at the monotony of Millett's repetitions as well.

especially, an enormous fear" (14). And the feminist consciousness (not ideological here, but intensely associative) charges the fear with a deep identification: "Because I was Sylvia Likens. She was me. . . . She was what 'happens' to girls Or can. Or might . . . if you are sixteen, or ever have been or female and the danger is all around you. Women, the corpses of women, surfacing in newsprint" (14). Millett's "I" becomes "you" and then "we," and the personal is exposed as public, and shared. Her assumption is that every woman will identify equally. She says, "We all have a story like this, and I had found mine" (14). The "story" here is the objective correlative for the internalized fear and shame of femaleness in our culture, and it is the recognition of that story as a cultural 'fable' that is the product (and producer) of a feminist consciousness. The female self/subject here, then, is both subject as agent of selfhood and subject as topic, as passive, as written upon.

Millett anticipates the frustrated, the reasoned reactions to the atrocity, "You think, why the hell did they do this?" (14) and echoes an answer the reader is expected to recognize:

> And then you see the line about being a prostitute and you know, though you can hardly think--in the sense of conceptualizing it--and you know, it is for sex. That they killed her for sex. Because she had it. She was it. . . . Because nubile and sixteen she is sex to the world around her and that is somehow a crime. For which her killing is punishment. Execution a sentence carried out. Upon Shame (14).

The broken syntax here suggests that only a small piece of this knowledge can enter at one time. Millett fragments it for forcefulness, and for particularizing the ideas. The paragraph ends on the capitalized, "Shame" and her next assertion indicates it is the answer to the question not yet asked. "And shame? The answer to the other question--'Why did she let them do it to her?' Sure, admittedly she was tied up the last few weeks" (15). Millett traces Sylvia's story as though reading it, as indeed she did, as we do: "But it says here" (the authority of the text relied on, while being challenged, in the idiom of newspaper readers everywhere) "But it says here that before that she was still free" (15). Millett asks the logical questions--why didn't she tell the teachers, the pastor, why didn't she run away? Millett answers the questions, "It was not only the body that must have been broken, but the spirit. And that is the whole meaning of shame" (15). Millett concludes her first chapter with reference to another story: "In Kafka's Penal Colony the sentence is carried out upon the flesh, written thereon so that it will enter into the soul. Here too" (15). In this sentence "here" is multiply ambiguous. "Here," in this text, is Sylvia Likens' body repeatedly undergoing its sentence(s) of death. "Here," in Sylvia's life, was her sentence (in words and in punishments) inscribed on her flesh. "Here" in this culture is sexual shame inscribed on women's lives.

Millett's treatment here is multiple. She makes a personal connection with Sylvia Likens, she makes a literary construct, and she reiterates a "case," a journalist's task. She speculates, analyses, interprets; she makes us (readers/the public) present and she makes us (women) recognize ourselves as participants in the shame, the violence, and the helplessness of the women here. She gives us the theatre of characters acting parts and the fiction of the language of their inner selves. All these discourses, all these idioms are informed by two terrible kinds of knowing: this horror happened/these people and events are real. And their reality is not the text's reality. This is the writing of Kate Millett's interior self--the boundaries between her identity and Sylvia Likens and her story blurred by the common fact of femaleness. And by the consciousness of the almost absolute domination of gender as determining "fable." The tensions between Kate Millett as she speaks herself here, Sylvia Likens (dead girl), Gertrude Baniszewski (eyes shadowed, mouth in a downward curve in her photographs) and what Millett calls "my Sylvia," "my Gertrude," are the connective tissue of Millett's meditations. Acutely and consistently self-conscious, Millett is relentlessly self-questioning about her obsession with these people, the events, the details--indeed the significance of details makes up the body of this text in which the torture of Sylvia's body is enacted repeatedly.

II

The Basement is arranged into three segments or "parts"; each tells the same story. The movement is not chronological, but rather spirals inwardly, seeming to look for a center to the puzzle, to the horror and mystery, and finally even to the experience--Sylvia's and Gertrude's.[9] With each turn of the spiral Millett moves into a greater intimacy with Sylvia Likens, focusing more intently on her exhausted defeat.

The first unit, Part I, is organized into numbered chapters, unlike the others in which section breaks have no formal attention drawn to them. The control and organization evident in Part I seems to be straining to hold in the physical and emotional violence of this story and of Millett's passionate relation to the text she is making. In Part I, Chapter One, Millett gives us herself, her obsession; she gives a dead girl, the shocking circumstances of her death and the conventions of a mid-western funeral. Moreover she offers a context--social, ideological and literary--in which this death can be understood. In fact,

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[9] I am reminded of the way the horror stories of war are told and retold, the obscenity of the trenches or the jungle treks have become obsessive icons of manhood in western culture. The book seems to be the answer to the question, "What was it REALLY like?" Perhaps Kate Millett's is the female version of the male war story. I.e., this story tells what it really means to be a man/woman. Millett, of course, makes a similar point in her frequent comparison of Sylvia with other victims of political torture, and in her obvious links with wife-battering, etc.

she insists that this murder must be understood, rather than merely dismissed as the work of "moral imbeciles." She starts from the end of Sylvia's life, which is not the end of her story.

The setting, in microcosm, is framed by Kate Millett in her hotel rooms rehearsing the words we are reading. In a sense this writing is the end of Millett's involvement with Sylvia Likens though it is the beginning of this text. The specific beginning for Millett is fixed as she comes across the story in a magazine she is scanning between classes. The layered beginning, then, is paralled by the ending, the first layer of which opens the book. The larger frame is the ideological boundaries of this crime. These Millett textualizes as a "fable" and "emblem" of a world lost to women, in which fear and shame, guilt and punishment are linked to female sexuality. The text itself, as object, is bounded by an appendix containing photographs: a full page school portrait of Sylvia Likens; several of Gertrude Baniszewski; of the basement stairwell under which Syvia was kept, paint cans, a broken chair, a bundle of rags; a snapshot of the huge clapboard house; shots of Coy Hubbard, Paula Baniszewski and some of the others; Jenny Likens leaving the courtroom. In the text Millett gives us the photos through her relation to them: "When I write I hold them before me. Them. Gertrude and her band; even the house on New York Street, even its basement. Photographs

only, of course. All I can get" (16). This opening of the second chapter again establishes Millett at the heart/ center of the story reading and rewriting the experience-- holding the "characters" (with regret that it is only photographs she can get?).

The photos evoke conjecture and speculation. Millett muses on the changes that Gertrude undergoes in the course of her imprisonment: the comfort and care and good food available in prison, the freedom from the grind of poverty and a horde of children to feed, her lawyers' careful choice of clothes for her, the energy she exudes in the pictures. Millett considers the responses of lawyers, press, public. Her speculations are presented as that, tentative and conversational. With the casual tone the excessive and bizarre rapidly become familiar. The alien and dreadful seem to peel back revealing the ordinary and conventional. Millett considers Gertrude's response to the men now around her, "how their eyes seemed to respect the crime in its participants, their manners nearly courtly, 'nicer' than any she had known in men" (18). Her prose slips from her musing about Gertrude to the reporters: "always she was important . . . . Evil beyond any evil these figures had ever approached . . . the big one. . . . Because it was torture. A thing nearly unknown. Or so common on a small scale as to be overlooked. But torture to death held almost a grandeur" (18). The angle of her attention takes another shift as her

consideration of the reporters' fascination with Gertrude becomes a general imaginative invitation into the event:

> To be tied in a basement and slowly and ritually murdered.The nightmare of everyone, remembered or first expressed in the games of children, all the endless rigamarole of ropes, knots, games of blindfolding or gags. . . . Even the very habit of playing in basements . . . cool and damp, cavelike and hidden. . . . Places of sexual experimentation. . . . The place to smoke cigarettes. . . . Or the murder games in darkened houses. . . . you can play it upstairs if you have the house to yourselves, if you are teenagers, the girls playing too, its suspense both terrible and delirious, the waiting in the dark, a waiting almost sexual, the moment of assault, the moment played out in a hundred films (18-19).

This evocation of the familiar and the shared is the most common of Millett's rhetorical strategies at this stage, and it lulls the reader until an abrupt shift brings us back to Millett and the photographs, and to the reality behind the photos: "But all this is a far more subtle affair than the filthy bundle of clothes under Gertrude's cellar steps" (20). Millett collapses "I" and "you" in her description of the photos and their effects. She says, "The very way of telling makes you gasp in unforseen response," and reasserts the fact of the writtenness of this event by asserting the inadequacy of words: "shock or horror or disgust--all words so cheap and ineffective when compared to the picture or the sensation it evokes" (20). The childhood memories then are twisted, the invitation into the basements of our memories/childhood is suspended while the socially responsive adult reacts to the photographs of the house: "The very sordidness of that staircase, the humdrum poverty

of the sink makes us ashamed such human lives were ever lived" (20). With that sensibility Millett takes "us" closer to such lives: "endless tomorrows so barren of hope or even interest that they chose to kill for sustenance.// And entertainment. Because it must have been fun" (20). She forestalls readerly resistance by establishing a position then reflecting on what she has asserted: ". . . fun. Peculiar word. This takes a long time to discover or admit" (20). She allies herself with her reader's recoil against the idea of torture as fun, and thus draws us close as she tracks the insistent force of her insight: "So obvious, lying right in sight, the insistence borne in on you at last, that with whatever anger or confusion . . . religious correctness . . . even beyond these full satisfactions--there was pleasure. Excitement, the special excitement of group sport. Even its sense of play, of game, of improvised theatre" (20). Abruptly the common ground between the torturers and the reader (and writer) is re-asserted. Millett elaborates on the kinds of "fun"--the sexual energy of all the childhood basement games and the concomitant master-slave, captor-captive relations with their sense of fantasy and power--, but as she draws this familiar picture, the real events again rise against the fantasy and shared experience:

> This is the thing come true. Because the victim has no complicity, . . . is not a player. Because this is not play, has passed beyond that, has become life. For the victim. And for her younger sister, Jenny Likens, who

> was made to stand by helpless. For the tormentors it is still play, playing with their victim's life, as one animal worries the body of another to death, the moral order of human beings utterly transcended (21).

From the generalities and abstractions Millett selects details to demonstrate the kind of fun, play, power the "basement theatre" allowed: "laughter . . . as Johnny hits upon the brilliant idea of shoving Sylvia down the basement steps. . . . the 'good times' of group enterprise, the chumminess. . . . And for wit they forced Sylvia to insert a Coca-Cola bottle in her vagina. They had fun" (21).[10] Distanced by revulsion, we are drawn back again, this time by Millett's socio-historical speculations: "the public relished this case . . . special appeal in crime . . . enacting the forbidden . . . always the thrill of identification" (22). She names the inclusive categories of adults who have ever struck a child or wanted to as those who may well identify with Gertrude (22). With the constant embrace and repulsion of this chapter, Millett subverts any suspension of ambiguity in our responses. With her, we must be appalled by the horror of Sylvia's death, while we acknowledge an association with the kind of killing it was.

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[10] Reported in The University of Toronto student newspaper: "Several campus groups are up in arms over a September 8 incident involving some male engineers and a female inflatable doll.//The doll episode occurred during the U of T's Engineering Society's 1987 orientation. Several engineering students used beer bottles to simulate various sex acts in what several witnesses called a gang rape. . . . Engineering Society Vice President (Activites) Keren Morehead said, . . . 'It's not supposed to be a gang rape. . . . It's supposed to be fun,'" in The Varsity, vol. 108, no. 7 (Oct. 1, 1987).

The torturers are humanized by our likeness to them, while the crime is exposed in its full grotesqueness.

Moving from speculation and association Millett turns (and returns) to documentation. She dramatizes the moment of finding, in the five volumes of documents from the trial and newspapers, a particular image in the series of photographs of Sylvia as a naked corpse, body scarred with cigarette burns, mutilated: "But . . . it was the mouth. . . . Looking at this mouth would drive me mad, because both lips had been chewed almost in half. . . . Self-inflicted. This was not done to her--but of course it was. . . . A grief so grievous it wounds itself" (25). Millett focuses on this torn mouth of the girl, and the double anguish of a self-inflicted torment, when the self is already destroyed by others. We note the double focus, in which the text mirrors Millett's own anguish as well. Her intensity at this particular detail (she is "driven mad" she says) must have to do with her own re-living of Sylvia's experience, her own place of speaking as an obsessive one, the pain of the telling not simply self-inflicted but a requirement of her personal psychological organization (this is her "story" we recall) and her feminist grasp of Sylvia as her and as any sixteen-year-old girl in our culture.

Millett treats the court records and testimony of police, doctors and defendants as she does the photographs: she fragments them and then speculates, analyses,

interprets. In short, she makes meaning, an epistemology of emotional and imaginative association and speculation out of her submersion in the documents of this time, these people. With the transcripts of testimony and out of the voices of the torturers and of Jenny Likens, Millett constructs scenes, dramatizations, making it possible and necessary to enter the events. As in her reactions to the photographs, she traces her responses to the legal testimony. Fragmenting the photographs or the testimonies, the text moves into narrative reconstructions of how it may or must have been, how a particular event could have developed, and how it might have felt to be there in the body of Gertrude, of Jenny, of Sylvia in the moments in which, for example, Sylvia is held under scalding water. Millett is describing the photograph of the bathroom:

> Only the tub is mysterious. It has feet. The amiable old-fashioned claw kind, the claw clutching a ball, the ball resting on the floor. . . . An object as heavy with innocence and familiarity as a cast-iron bathtub. But what screams did this room hear, what struggles, Paula holding, Gertrude holding, the water hot beyond bearing, Sylvia's skin burned around the neck and shoulders as Ellis testified. . . . The foray as Sylvia is driven into the bath, carried, lifted, one figure at her head, one at her feet. . . .
>
> This took place a number of times each week. On an ordinary Friday night, Coy Hubbard [a teenaged neighbor] might drop by when Sylvia would be in the bath, subjected to the bath. . . . the sound of it [a body] struggling as others hold it, lower it into the fierce water, the thrashing about, the pleading. All gone now. The room is empty, indifferent. Looking at the photographic copy of it, it is hard to conjure up all their legs, Paula's and Gertrude's grouped around the clawed feet. The sounds, the commotion (59).

The peculiar focus on the legs of these people, this almost askew moment of imagination, is what makes the passage full of tension. The photographic image is peopled, is invested with sound and with feeling, terror and pain, and the ordinary Friday-nightness of it sliding into the perplexing violence and then the momentary envisioning of the legs, the commotion, charges the scene with presence at the same time that it evokes instant absence (the flat, black and white image).

III

The photographs make time stop for a moment. They work as one of the pivots from which Millett utterly disrupts the chronology of events. A piece of factual evidence will receive glancing attention, and then the text will return to it, creating a scene, or a discourse or a musing, often from varying perspectives, until the fullest possible textualizing of the experience, of Millett's inhabiting of the experience, is achieved. Eventually the specificity of the pain is lost in the repetitions, for the reader as it must have been for Sylvia. Virtually every violence that Sylvia Likens was subjected to is treated in this way, but some lend themselves to particular readings. Millett pays both precise and deeply associative attention to the fact that Sylvia's vagina was kicked repeatedly by Gertrude and various others. First mention of the kick is made in the doctor's testimony: "'The external vagina was swollen and

ecchymotic as though it had been kicked--it was extremely puffy, the labia'" (36, fn. 16). It is supplemented in responses to further questioning by the prosecutor:

> "Doctor, you stated you examined the labia and pubic area?"
> "That is right."
> "Did you find any evidence of sexual manipulation?"
> "No sir, I did not, or molestation." (38, fn. 19)

Millett notes that

> [i]t seems curious that the kick directed to the vagina . . . does not qualify as molestation, but the meaning of this exchange is narrower: there was no doing to Sylvia of a sexual nature, only of a hostile one. Just as the instrument of her rape was a Coca-Cola bottle . . . sex was to hurt and humiliate, but not to partake of. And so Sylvia Likens probably died a virgin to her tormentors. And they avoided sin and contamination. Because they kicked, rather than fucked her (38).

The use of the plain word "fucked" separates Millett irrevocably from puritanical forces and from those who can so neatly separate sexuality from the violence of a kick to the genitals. The kicking, as part of the generalized pattern of torture, is submerged, but surfaces repeatedly as Millett makes the connections explicit between this torture and others: the literary (Kurtz's skulls in <u>The Heart of Darkness</u> as horror, "artifact," and Sylvia Likens' face in death "a product, an artifact" [42]), the political (Millett wonders if the Iranian secret police torturer has a "mental cast similar to that of Richard Hobbs? or Gertrude?" (43), and the gendered. Inevitably, Millett is reminded of the genital mutilation of young women in various cultures, the most disturbing parallel of which is that "however much this

act is the will of the tribe and its men, it is done by women" (44). Millett points out that among all the arguments supporting clitoral excision, the strongest is that against female autonomy, independent sexual pleasure. She says, "Here is ideology. And not altogether foreign to that which pressed in on Sylvia" (45).

She returns to the courtroom, and to another description of the testimony about the kick. "Having established that this hematoma is a bruise . . . and that all this is indication of a blow to the vagina, probably a kick--'this would take a pretty good blow' (fn 22), Ellis asserts in a particularly unfortunate choice of words," (50)--, the prosecutor must still ask for clarification of sexual damage. Millett comments, "Girls are only damaged one way" (50). Her elaborated response to the medical evidence that no "entrance occurred" (fn 23) is sharp with indignation:

> A dry fuck indeed. A kick. But no entry by hand or mouth or tongue or penis. Sexuality without sex. Pure ideology. Ideas about sex, notions, values, superstitions, feelings, hatreds, fears--everything about sex but the thing itself, the act of it of such powerful taboo that one resorts to violence, to sadism, to any and every brutality to avoid it. To stamp it out. The doctor's voice goes on in the courtroom (51).

The medical reports and the social attitudes they expose, these are the voices of reason and control.

But later in this text Millett reconstructs the kicking, Gertrude's voice a master of ceremonies directing the group brutalities against Sylvia:

> You're gonna get a real kick out of it too. We're gonna put the boot to you. Right between the legs. Right where the problem is. We're all gonna work on you. First I want Rickie to try. But I'm gonna show you first, Rickie. You gotta aim real good and get her right in the center....Watch what I'm gonna do now, all of you. There, right there. See that? Listen to her yell. . . . You'll get your turn Paula, but I want the boys to be first. They gotta meet the devil head on. That's sin, Rickie boy, kick it hard. Hard's ya can. . . . That's enough, now remember it's dirty (270-271).

Again events are linked by association rather than by linear time. Following the passage above, Sylvia's voice speaks:

> Still after they're gone, it keeps on happenin, her over me, tellin 'em how. No, I shove her outa my mind. The kickin did it. That Gertrude would stand over me and watch my face. . . . With Rickie and Johnny watchin so they could do it too and that big fat Paula kneelin on my legs (271).

Later, Millett returns to the scene from the perspective of one of the teenagers present, a young man who "grinned" a lot during his testimony: "She [Gertrude] was really kind of a freak in his opinion, a loser. Sylvia, too, matter of fact. Different way, but the same thing. Most people were losers really if you watch them--and really you want to keep most of yourself clear of them" (317). Gliding from conjectures about Randy Leper to his own voice, Millet funnels us into Randy's thoughts while he watches the court proceedings, assessing the other participants in the beatings, remembering various occasions at Gertrude's, (re)living those moments:

> Lookit Gerty showin off in front of us. Grown-up woman hittin a girl with two guys watchin. Johnny wants to do it now too. . . . not sure his old lady's gonna let him by, doin it. Okay for her, but is it okay for him?

> Wouldn't mind tryin myself. Might be fun. Might be interestin. Never hit one of 'em there (319).

IV

The ideological substratum, the loathing of female sexuality, that these brutalities reveal is reinforced by the attention to the words used to torture Sylvia Likens. Millett returns again and again to the tattooing with a hot needle of the words "I am a prostitute and proud of it" on the girl's belly. The physical branding was said to be retribution for Sylvia's alleged "branding" of Paula with a bad name at school.[11] Millett links the etching of these words with her eroticized account of the paddling that Paula administered under Gertrude's direction. Gertrude is remembering punishing Sylvia and Jenny for eating too much at the church picnic:

> Now we always count, gives suspense cause they never know how many. And they're just screaming wild now the noise comin way down in their chests, nearly chokin they're cryin and beggin and talkin and up to ten now and I can feel it in my pants. Even my stomach's excited like when you hurry it or when you're scared. . . . If I didn't look, if I didn't see I'd just hear the yellin and want 'em to shut up. Might even feel sorry. But it's lookin. When I see them red little butts thrash around on the bed--guess you could get as excited by touchin 'em. . . . But that's bad. Devil's work. Not even supposed to think about that. Lookin's different. Lookin when they bein corrected and taught not to make pigs of themselves in public. . . . Gotta see it. Gotta watch. Gotta look, look, look at them butts, them little asses laid out flat on the bed. . . . on their bellies. . . . Yellin so loud I worry sometimes course anyone's in the right whippin a child

[11] The collapse of metaphoric "branding" with a bad name and the physical branding of the girl's body suggests a kind of breakdown of different dimensions of reality--the physical and the verbal. Words take on magical powers here.

> but still. Never mind. Watch 'em, Paula's arm up and down and their sobbin. Redder redder movin. Here it is, here here. Yes. Look at that red bottom on Sylvia, few more it'd be blood. Yes. Yes. One more and I've got it. There. Oh my god there (207-208).

We must note how late this passage is in the text. The explicit eroticism, or sexualization, of the early beatings is textually linked to the attribution of sexual evil to Sylvia. Desire and punishment are implicated deeply with each other here as the object of desire is punished and the punishment simultaneously fulfills and displaces desire, with the added benefit of purifying the object and the agent both. That is, achieving the desired goals, conscious and unconscious (purification through punishment, orgasm through domination) allows the gratification of completion while implying the necessity of repetition. Millett's rhetoric here of fundamentalist righteousness, sado-masochistic pornography, and the most elegant Joycean stream-of-consciousness combines to make intelligible the desire and fury and lust propelling a Gertrude. Indeed, we might wonder if the writing of arousal here is designed to make the reader <u>feel</u> the pleasure of that sexual rhythm along with that "lookin." The sexualized Sylvia is thus indisputably "a temptation" and one that Gertrude has "vowed to the Lord" to chastise and "correct" (213).[12] Millett

[12] Millett takes the phrasings from Gertrude's testimony in which she pleaded innocent, blaming all the violence on the youngsters admitting only that she once "tried" to whip the girl (119, fn 15; 131, fn 26).

engages here in a delicate manoeuver. She makes us complicit with Gertrude in so far as we experience her arousal. But Millett prevents the pornographic rhetoric from functioning pornographically--with unmitigated erotic response--by the timing of this scene. The eroticized beatings took place early in Sylvia and Jenny's presence in Gertrude's house, yet they appear late in the text. By the time the reader encounters this erotic "pleasure" or arousal, possibilities have been utterly exhausted, and we are forced to a recognition of the horror of that complicity.

With the inscription on Sylvia's body, Millett gives us a variety of comprehensions. Randy Leper's view: "all this time they're tellin her what a shit she is and she's sayin go to hell--but the writing did it. She agrees with 'em now. That proved it somehow, she can't get away from livin behind them words"(319). Gertrude, to Sylvia: "'No one will ever marry you now. You can't take off your clothes for no man now. . . . You're proud of it, ain't you. You're proud of it Sylvia.' The sobs harder, longer, more distant, forlorn. 'Hah. Look at her, she don't give a hoot, she don't say a word'" (286). Sylvia, in the basement:

> God, please I'm even real sorry I done it. . . . With whore written right across my stomach now for the whole world to see all my life forever. . . . so many of 'em all saying the same thing so maybe they gotta be right. And after today and the writin happened then I knew I was really what they say. . . . The dirty one. The whore and the harlot that they been sayin all

> along. . . . All with the guilt right on my body. Even before they wrote the words (298-299).

Millett interpretes the branding, its meaning to the torturers: "The branding with words, the words themselves, were the crisis point, the orgasm that purifies because it produces disgust . . . the thing that inspired it hereafter loathsome" (292). Sylvia kept naked or nearly naked comes to mean nothing, "a forked animal to them. Gertrude will convert her to an ideal. And the animal is not even an animal finally but an abstraction--whore, prostitute, wickedness" (293) until Sylvia, "the naked wretch with the writing on her stomach has lost all its treacherous appeal now, utterly safe . . . named now, labeled, defused" (294-295).

Sylvia was forced to say the word "whore": from Sylvia's interior monologue: "I say whore for them. Over and over, they wanna hear it all the time. And they say it. If they say anything" (263). In this chanting of that word, Millett insists, humanness is emptied out--purity of abstraction displaces any remote human connection. To grasp how destructive this repetition of that word could be we might contrast Sylvia's experience with that of Jacobo Timmerman during his imprisonment and torture in Argentina. Timmerman's torturers chanted the word "Jew" as they beat him.[13] Timmerman could take on the word: he was a Jew, and

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[13] Jacobo Timmerman, Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number, trans. Toby Talbot (New York: Vintage Books, 1982) esp. 61, 132. This book read parallel with The Basement is

inhabited that identity with pride, using their hatred for strength and affirmation and community. No such possibility could exist for Sylvia with the word "whore." With the branding, Sylvia Likens' body speaks against her in an explicit accusation, the flesh no longer merely a metaphor for guilt, but a referent for the sign it carries. When the body is so articulate, its power to communicate inwardly must be at least as powerful as the external message. The purpose and function of the writing, or even of the mere word "whore," is its effect in breaking through to the sexual guilt and shame that is the submerged consciousness of any female in patriarchal society.

Millett emphasizes that shame in her description of her encounter with a woman who spoke to her after a lecture on this book. Identifying herself as someone who knew Sylvia, who had been sixteen the year Sylvia was killed, she described what she and the other girls had felt at that time:

> but it made us ashamed . . . cause it was sexual, or sort of sexual, the words on her stomach, I mean. . . . it was sexual and everybody knew it, but they didn't say it. . . . But it was there and it was us, too, somehow. As if she was, like dishonored, you know, and we were too in some way. . . . We were ashamed even

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deeply informative. The ideological and experiential relationship between Timmerman's suffering in prison and Sylvia Likens' in the house on New York Street is instructive for the kinds of civil rights and privileges Timmerman enjoyed that Sylvia had no access to. Nevertheless, the hatred of his Jewishness and the hatred of Sylvia's femaleness are close. We cannot assume this is merely the ideological 'reading' of Millett and Timmerman. The torture and the words were both real.

> though we never quite knew why, but something had spoken to us through all this, that we were pretty easy to get. Weak, vulnerable, maybe even guilty somewhere or dirty or whatever (68-69).

Millett observes to her, "one would think you'd be angry, aggrieved. People feel communal resentment after one of them is wronged" (68). Explaining that "we were girls" the young woman says, "'If we identified with her, it would only be as victims too'" (68). Moving instantly from this remembered response (or reinterpreted recall, it doesn't matter which in the light of the shift Millett makes) to Sylvia Likens' murder to the astonishing case of Richard Speck, Millett does not, at first, focus on the facts but rather on the reaction of the woman reader to those facts: "It's the impotence we feel, reading how Richard Speck, alone and unaided and without a weapon, murdered eight student nurses, one by one, going from room to room, tying and strangling them, the one next to die hearing the dying scream" (69). She understands this devastating passivity as the necessary requirement "to be "feminine," and that means "to be already defeated in fear by . . . carefully conditioned certainty that there is no point in struggling, that the moment the enemy comes, the aggressor puts a hand on the doornob, is the moment one dies" (70). The best women can hope for then, she says, is "not to be raped . . . not to be tortured first. . . . To cooperate, To hold out the hands to be tied, to beg quietly. . . . To mimic every gesture of submission even as in animals, the dog rolling on

its back. Even as in women. To be 'feminine'" (70). Barely supressed rage is here in the rhythm and structure of these passages, in the blending of factual details (the student nurses did indeed, obediently, hold out their hands for Speck to tie them) with conjecture and surmise, and in the chronicling of our reduction to bestial forms of submission.

V

Millett's concentration upon the particular abuses, and upon examining each variety of violence for what ever shards of meaning can be invested or divested from it, is consistent with her attention to the specific details of everyday life in Gertrude Baniszewski's household. Millett explains that "Finally it is not even faces one studies, but artifacts. The pictures of <u>things</u>" (54). We recall that Millett sees that Sylvia's mouth has become "artifact" (42), her whole self "their thing" (293). The inversion of person into thing, meaningless in, to, or for itself, that took place in the process of destroying Sylvia parallels the infusion of the power of signification into the objects that inhabit this text. In her description of the New York Street house, the poverty and depression that characterize it, Millett considers, for example, the spoons: "Gertrude had nine persons to feed and one spoon to do it with" (55). Millett footnotes this declaration with an aside that offers insight into how she approaches and uses the documentation available. The footnote reads,

> This fact emerged unexpectedly during the trial. When you first come across it, it seems an odd little detail, tangential--but when you think about it, it speaks volumes of a way of life. Jenny finds herself explaining it to a puzzled assistant district attorney, Mrs Wessner: "You see they shared their spoons. One would get through using it and would wash it off." . . . There had been three at the beginning, but finally there was only one (55, fn. 1).

Millett circles round the question of the spoons, taking into account Gertrude's finances, her absent husband, her brutal lover who hospitalized her twice, "But still how do you get down to one spoon?" (56)--"the spoons remain a mystery" (57) to Millett who notes that Gertrude could afford a lawyer, a doctor, a television, "So that the question of spoons is not simply poverty, but poverty of a special kind, a kind of disorganization hard to imagine in someone responsible for nine children" (57). Of course the spoon reappears as an aspect of Sylvia's torment, when she is denied its use (252). The spoons (we could also consider Millett's treatment of soap, or toast, or cigarettes or pop bottles) become emblems of a particular kind of disorder, invested with a significance that Naomi Schor designates a quality of "female paranoia." In her study of the aesthetics of the detail and its relation to "the feminine" she notes that "to read in detail . . . is to invest the detail with a truth-bearing function, and yet . . . the truth value of the detail is anything but assured. As the guarantor of meaning, the detail is . . . constantly

threatened by falsification and misprision."[14] Millett is very much a reader in this text, and as such she seems textually to turn the objects and people this way and that, each angle of attention to each detail imbued with possible meaning, yet, discarded and laid aside or held suspended in the movement to the next detail. The stressed item/object/person/figure acquires a patina of significance and with each layer of attention its power as an inflictor of humiliation or pain upon Sylvia Likens, or as a clue to this mystery, is intensified.[15] The "truth-bearing function" of the textual detail has in actuality had its significance established in its historical usefulness as an instrument of Sylvia's torture. The emotional or cultural or political significance of the detail for us, however, is acquired by Millett's treatment of it.

VI

The last third of this book is dominated by the dialogue, or rather, the parallel monologues of Sylvia and Gertrude, the interior language of Sylvia in the basement experiencing her own dying, and Gertrude pacing, and thinking above her. The slow repetitive registering of these minds, of Millett's

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[14] Naomi Schor, Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine (New York and London: Methuen, 1987) 7.

[15] Millett often speaks of this as a "mystery" giving the word its popular fiction connotation as well as the more grand and sacred suggestiveness that "meditations on a human sacrifice" call for. For example, "Because she would die here everything held a mystery for Sylvia" (58). Clearly in this sentence, Millett conflates herself with Sylvia entirely. It is she, Millett, for whom everything holds a "mystery" in that house.

infusion of personhood into them, mesmerizes long after the reader's identification with the "characters" has been burned away by the extremes of Sylvia's pain or Gertrude's cruelty. We watch and listen and wait. There we find another part of ourselves (in Millett's mirror) with Jenny Likens, the younger sister with a brace on her leg from polio, sharer of the early, naked, paddlings and gradually a silent, helpless, present observer of her sister's slow murder. Only after Sylvia was dead, bewildered police wandering around the house, did Jenny say, "If you get me outta here I'll tell you everything" (269). Millett wonders if Jenny's courage was the result of her fear that, with Sylvia dead, she would be next, or if at last she sensed some weakness in Gertrude's omnipotence. Jenny is

> the very common denominator we dislike most to admit. The ordinary soul in extraordinary circumstances who cannot accomplish the heroic, who tries and still can't get up the nerve. Closer to all of us than we care to acknowledge. And how we hate cowardice in others, feeling it so pervasively in ourselves. . . . The knowing against knowing that the enemy is inside ourselves, that we are our own undoing, that at bottom, we are despicable. And therefore we cannot act--because we have not acted (269).

All action is repetition: just as part of Gertrude's actions can be explained by repetition (she can do this because she has done this), so Jenny's passivity is explained by the absence of precedence. Again the "we" makes this writing an inscription of us all, this text a kind of everyone's story; only the circumstances are exceptional.

As a cultural reflection, this text writes the reader, not in the idiosyncratic wretchednesses but in the familiar movements of dominance and submission, sexual excitements and anxieties, the smooth worn archetypes of political power and mythic potencies. Despite being situated in its precise location in time, space, class, economics, race and national habits, and gender orientations, this story dismantles those particular historical boundaries. The gags used on Sylvia are "medieval" (295); her inablity to make tears (after some hours of beating and burning) witch-like (306); Gertrude, too, is a witch figure, distorted by the loss of ancient female power:

> once the wicca, or wise woman, denigrated to the evil female of fairy tales . . . [a] warning, a notification to females; the news of their defeat . . . the great goddess no longer protects us, we must fear one another. As all must fear the female. For the male, who has changed everything, fears these old images most of all: Kali . . . Ishtar, Hecate--all words to fear....Now in the very evening of patriarchy, sacrificing the maiden with whose murder this age dawned long ago (316).

Associating Gertrude with the inversion of the protection once afforded women by female power (at least mythically) embeds this crime in a kind of racial memory of loss that must be enacted repeatedly. The individuals become emblematic of an ancient power struggle, and the forces working within and against them take on an impersonal and inexorable energy.

Set against this mythic dimension (itself juxtaposed to the grit of the imaginary conversations and thoughts of

Gertrude and Sylvia) is the peculiar language of court testimony. In that writing, Gertrude and the others have an existence in language that may be factual but, nevertheless, is false. The rhetoric of the courts, of the legal procedures, of the court "grammarian" who corrects the spoken testimony (92), falsifies the language and thus the reality of the "actors" in this drama. Millett reflects that the language of these people as it comes from their mouths is "ironically false-sounding" (her emphasis, 93). The fiction of Millett's constructions sounds more "real" than the reality does.

VII

Kate Millett's own "reality," however (as opposed to that of her "fraudulent" creations), is her self at work as "subject" (both topic and agent) of her own textual procedures. No "objective" testimony interferes with the levels of textual reality on which Millett lives.[16] Her subjectivity appears as potential in the lives of the other figures, as impulse to rage or defence, as the internalized cultural norm of female self-hatred. She desires to make articulate the instability of her consciousness and the

[16] Simultaneously, Millett seems to exist alongside this writing. I believe the phrase is Barthes' describing his presence in and out of his autobiographical writing--he exists alongside his textual self. Yet he says "Do I not know that, in the field of the subject, there is no referent? . . . writing myself . . . the symbolic becomes literally immediate: essential danger for the life of the subject." In Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 56.

complexity of her insight--registering differences and asserting samenesses as bases of this autography.

Millett speaks:

> I become Gertrude. I invent her, conceive her, enter into her, even into the long afternoons of her end, the habit of torture, its urgency, its privacy, the same obsession growing in me like cancer. Like a pregnancy. I am pregnant with Gertrude--and I am a fraud. My Gertrude never the real one, if there was one. For it was all secret. And remains so. Nothing in the courtroom or the light of day . . . the humdrum rhetoric . . . nothing there ever explains. . . . And too intimate unto herself for Gertrude ever to speak it even in the privacy of her own mind. . . . Only its edges, its details the memory of a reddened rump (and not even the memory, merely the picture flicked for a second . . .)--followed immediately by the realization that the household is out of bread--Jenny or Stephanie must be sent to the store (290).

Millett as "fraud" is confessed. Her Gertrude is made of language, but the "real" Gertrude cannot be contained or discovered in words, for they were not her medium. The everydaynesses of domestic life, the demands that fragment the attention of every mother, displace in Millett's understanding of Gertrude the kind of coherent self-knowledge that she associates with language. Millett's movement here: to make Gertrude, to unmake her, and then to recreate her, all this a virtuoso performance in the writing, not of Gertrude, or not only of Gertrude, but of Kate Millett. The Gertrude (like the Sylvia) she makes is a mask for Millett. And her explanation for Gertrude seems close enough to Millett's descriptions of her own experience of obsession to be unnerving. We recall her words "I go

further into fantasy, as far as delusion, even full-fledged possession, becoming Sylvia or Gertrude as day becomes the next day." She declares,

> One does not say: "I will torture this child to death." Torture was surely not a word Gertrude permitted herself. . . . She was "correcting" the child, "disciplining, ". . . All terms that she must have begun with and then lost sight of later. When it became secret. Secret even from herself. When it began to step beyond what she could explain in any familiar terms she understood, if not to say aloud then in the wordless flux of her mind . . . it became a mystery. Something she did, something that came over her, something that happened. . . . the great tent of it coming to a form whole and perfect around her just as it did to Sylvia, engulfing her in misery as it engulfed Gertrude in a wild new forcefulness, interest, vitality (290-291).

The power of the experience (and the experience of power) is allowed to develop because no language could affect it, contain it, represent it to Gertrude. Limited or liberated (Millett imagines) by the rhetoric of authority to which her Christian Fundamentalism gave her acc[illegible], Gertrude's understanding of her acts is framed by her belief that the children "are given to [her] to instruct. . . . Because that's what it is finally . . . the will of God, the burdens" (259). Yet Millett wonders,

> Do you think in sentences and achieve Gertrude's acts? Is it not a matter of phrases, single words, labels like table or rope--or more likely only sensations: tiredness, rage--pure feeling-states only which pass through the mind? 'Get her' or 'little bitch' or 'my back is killing me' or even just merely the pain in the back, the stab of it (81).

The tension at work here has its source in Millett's sense that "these are not characters but inarticulate historical

persons" (105). To make the inarticulate articulate is necessarily to falsify, to distort, and the only way to correct the distortion, to make the truth possible is to admit the "fraud." In so doing, Millett writes/ articulates an articulate historical person, herself.

The textual self-consciousness, the reiterated blurring of identities ("I was Sylvia Likens. She was me" [14]), do not obscure Millett here. She makes herself known, available in details that require us to know her as well as "I." We must feel her situation as she reads the volumes of court transcripts, for she makes herself present as/in a body. Sometimes this seems startlingly banal: she sees the photograph of Sylvia Likens' head, her mouth, as the eight by ten photographs slip out of a folder and fall to the floor. When she sees the image of the mouth that would drive her "mad" she says, "I wished I had a cigarette" (25). In each of the three photographs of Kate Millett that lie on my desk she is holding a cigarette. The superficial response that she has to the hideous image is in fact an expression of her deep addiction and need and desire.[17]

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[17] Millett takes on how easily cigarettes are fetishized: they are "impersonal" (294), and for torture, "far removed--the length of the arm. And not the use of the hand, not touch" (295). It is only after Sylvia has been made as "sexless as the pink rubber body of a doll" that Gertrude can begin in earnest with the cigarettes" (294). Millett's speculation about the use of cigarettes to torture Sylvia seems more detached than her other imaginings: "Something packaged, advertised, put out in plastic wrappers. . . . Foreign in every way to the flesh. To crush out a lit cigarette on human flesh is so perverse an idea it must have have even seemed novel to the band" (294-95). Her own

Kate Millett is at work in these "meditations," not merely her mind, but her body, the person, with her particular requirements. It is the existence of this person that Millett insists on when she says,

> I have lived a long time with these photographs, laid over and elaborating the mental picture I made standing before the real house, because I have been Sylvia dying or Gertrude tormenting . . . and have inhabited that place in imagination and feeling so long, I almost know the inside of that house (54).

Yet she inscribes her resistence, her refusal to take her body where her imagination lives: "The house at 3850 E. New York Street. I have seen both the house itself and its photograph; they are different. . . . I could never enter the house itself, the present house" (54). It is as though Millett will submit her mind (imagination/emotion) to any degree of torment, of self-knowledge, but her body she will protect from a complete yeilding to the New York Street house. (This is a point at which she is precisely NOT Sylvia Likens.) The years separating the horror from the house, the new paint job, these do not erase the "taint of what has occurred here . . . an aura permanent now . . . imbued now indelibly over the indifferent paper of police and news documents" (55). That "indifferent" writing has been written over, and the submission in the text to the obsessive power of this "story" has been interfered with by

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dependency on cigarettes does not seem to have made her identification with Gertrude in this instance more accessible. For further treatment of cigarettes, see the medical testimony: 150 burns were found on her body (138) and a scene from the trial (274).

Millett's resistence to the final submission of her body to that place.

Though we are never allowed to forget that her characters' voices <u>are</u> Millett's, she submerges or blurs her particular voice and enters her self to find the others. Following one of Gertrude's interior monologues, ("I'll teach her. I'll break that little face of hers"), Millett tells us, "Gertrude's screaming still echoing in my mind, but she is easier to know, to hear again in every fight one ever had. One's own bullying yell not that hard to summon" (99). Millett uses this as contrast to the difficulty of speaking Sylvia. And standing in her own shoes (so to speak) she addresses her difficulty to Sylvia:

> But you are harder, Sylvia, the figure bowed before Gertrude is harder to be. Or is one simply more ashamed finally, not very paradoxically, to remember this, the taste of every humiliation or defeat, the moment one is so despised one despises oneself (99-100).

The impersonal "one" is used interchangably with "I" in this passage, particular actions being taken by Millett as "I" ("I read again and again") while the questions are posited as those anyone might ask, the feelings those anyone might have. In her "conversations" with Sylvia, Millett is thus inscribing herself as well as the elusiveness of Sylvia (indeed, Sylvia's elusiveness is Millett's) and finally, uncomfortably, the textual hunt for Sylvia Likens seems to parallel the obsessive need/lust that Kate Millett's Gertrude exhibits in her desire to dominate, fix, control

Sylvia. Millett says, "I read again and again the descriptions . . . each time more anxious to locate you somewhere in them . . . . Sylvia, victim and center of the whole legend--how you escape me. How I lose touch with you, becoming the others" (100). The rhetorical flourishes here (the "hows," the use of apostrophe rather than a dialogic mode of speech) seem to stretch the literary and the emotional between them, and since the puzzle Millett wants to find the key to is the extent of/the reason for Sylvia's "complicity," Sylvia's "resistance," her recalcitrance in the face of Millett's hunger for her, is suggestive. Millett is perplexed by a statement Gertrude made when she was arrested: "'Sylvia wanted something from life. But I could not find out what it was'" (131, fn 27). The chilling echo of Millett's sense that Sylvia "escapes" her is in Gertrude's (that is, Millett's Gertrude) triumphant gloat, "I have her now. She's mine" (274). The problem here, for me, is in the textual hunt for, capture and possession of Sylvia Likens. Millett's need to "locate" Sylvia in words, even in the cage of her own fantasy of Sylvia's words, to force Sylvia to speak her experience makes an uncomfortable parallel with Millett's observation that tormentors (whether of political prisoners or Christian heretics) want "far more than 'information.' . . . They want conversions. They want belief" (83). Bodily submission, external control, these are not sufficient. The similarities and differences of

Millett and Gertrude, of Millett and Sylvia, of Millett and the reader, establish the complicity of everyone in our time and place with this ideology of power.

What distances Millett from the mere will to power or hunger for domination is her respect for Sylvia, for the fact of her as a separate and independent being with a life and a death of her own. Millett, despite her (exposed) frustration with Sylvia's elusiveness, constructs or evolves her knowledge of self with her acceptance of the limitations of textual power. She says to Sylvia, to the reader, and to herself,

> For sometimes I feel I know you and have been conversing with you for years. And especially now, trying to re-create your world. As if I knew it. Yet I think I know. Or perhaps merely remember--as one remembers a collective nightmare. Or I guess. Or I imagine. But the thing is--I have no certainty whatsoever. . . . How many months now I have hesitated even to write the smallest passage in your voice, to "put down" your thoughts--as if I knew what they were or had any insight into your own particular language. Fraud. The tricks of bookwriters. The glory of Faulkner's Benji. Was that he was Faulkner's Benji. But you are Sylvia. I did not make you up, you happened. And what you experienced, therefore would be of particular validity--if we knew it (104-105).

This writing of an unbounded feminist self has revealed the unspoken webbing of connections that makes Sylvia and Gertrude and Kate and the reader (male and female) participants in a culture of sexual hatred. The "particular validity" of Sylvia's actual experience can never be known, but Kate Millett's incursion into (and re-creation of) those people and events explores and exposes the cultural

construction of female sexuality that makes such violence possible. It is the presence in this text of Kate Millett's own identity in all its variations that makes The Basement a work of feminist ethical autography.

Chapter Five: "We're all we've got":[1] Intersected Sisterhood

The mutually transformative relations (the edges that blur) between the individual, the feminist context, and the dominant culture are continuously shifting. The site of these modifications for the feminist writer is the feminist community of discourse and action, and this chapter will consider feminist writers whose concerns focus on the relations of self and community. "Self" in this thesis has been consistently problematized, unstable and fluid. Yet self-hood, subjectivity, personal agency, either of action or of consciousness, seems always present in feminist discourse. As a consistent element in the belief that the personal is political--one of the basic principles of feminist consciousness--the self is an inescapable issue in feminist ideology. Contrary to the fear of some feminist thinkers that the political becomes merely personal in concerns about self-hood (as in Shelia Rowbotham's feeling that the "slogan" "tends to imply that all individual problems can find a short term political solution"),[2] the familiar phrasing continues to undergo transformations in interpretation and in its power to inspire transformation.

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[1] Cherrie Moraga, "Loving in the War Years," in Loving in The War Years (Boston: South End Press, 1983) 30.
[2] Sheila Rowbotham, "The Women's Movement and Organizing for Socialism" in Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism, eds. Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, and Hilary Wainwright (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981) 31.

In Teresa de Lauretis's words, self-consciousness as feminist process is

> a recasting of the notion that the personal is the political which does not simply equate and collapse the two . . . but maintains the tension between them precisely through the understanding of identity as multiple and even self-contradictory.[3]

As women's senses of self in the world are modified in the process of an evolving feminist consciousness, the context too is understood differently. Self, as a political issue, is the basis from which (western) women have resisted the definitions and designations of various male authorities (religious, psychoanalytic, literary or political--right or left). And it is the basis from which women of colour have resisted the assumptions that white feminists have inappropriately generalized from their own experience to that of all women.[4] Feminists, like everyone else, live in a racist context. Women of colour and white women share some aspects of female oppression: all women are vulnerable to rape, require reproductive choice, share in female "shame."[5] But women of colour, in addition to specifically racist abuses, are more likely to suffer what we think of as

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[3] Teresa de Lauretis, "Issues, Terms, Contexts," in Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 9.

[4] We recall Adrienne Rich's words about white radical feminists: "To believe that it was right to identify with all women, to wish deeply and sincerely to do so, was not enough. (I still hear the voice of a Black feminist saying with passionate factuality: But you don't know us!)" Blood, Bread, and Poetry (New York: Norton, 1986) x.

[5] See Millett, above; and Trinh Minh-ha, "Introduction," Discourse 8 (Fall-Winter 86-87) 5-6.

abuse as women. The weight of double (or multiple in the case of lesbian, handicapped, or poor women) oppressions or colonizations has been clearly elaborated and I need not retrace that ground here. Instead, I wish to examine the issue of the presence of a "dominant" point of view working within a feminist community and against explictly feminist values. Marilyn Frye's discussion of how a group of feminists, of colour and white, encountered this problem is typical. In "On Being White," Frye describes her confusion and dismay at the rage of a black woman upon hearing that a group of white feminists had decided to meet to form a white women's anti-racist consciousness-raising group ("She exploded with rage: 'You decided!'").[6] Only after serious thought was Frye able to overcome her despair that "It seemed like doing nothing would be racist and whatever we did would be racist just because we did it" (112). She came to the understanding that every "choice or decision" that she makes is within "a matrix of oppositions" that includes racist distortions. She says,

> As a white woman I have certain freedoms and liberties. When I use them, according to my white woman's judgment, to act on matters of racism, my enterprise reflects strangely on the matrix of options within which it is undertaken. . . . It becomes clearer why no decision I make here can fail to be an exercise of race privilege (113).

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[6] Marilyn Frye, The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1983) 111. Further references will appear in the text.

I understand Frye to be saying that the decision to pay attention to racism is a choice for white women, and not a choice for women of colour. For that reason (among others) it is a manifestation of white privilege. It is also a manifestation of feminist obligation. Without it, there is no more than an engagement or competition with (white) men for a greater share of their material world.

For women of colour to pay attention to racism is not necessarily to focus their attention upon whites. But it does mean that to speak themselves requires a greater force of resistance against the weight of silence that is assumed by the dominant culture. In the women's movement some of that weight is the silence, invisiblity, or alienation that isolation imposes. The account Cherrie Moraga gives of being the only woman of colour in a group, and the release of talk, laughter, energy when other Chicana women appeared at a conference is a moving example of this phenomenon:

> In a real visceral way I hadn't felt the absence (only assumed the fibers of alienation I so often felt with anglo women as normative). Then for the first time, speaking on a panel about racism here in San Francisco, I could physically touch what I had been missing. There in the front row, nodding encouragement and identification, sat five Latina sisters. . . . For once in my life every part of me was allowed to be visible and spoken for in one room at one time.[7]

The experience of fragmentation that Moraga implies here, in which some parts of self must be invisible, some parts

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[7] Cherrie Moraga, "Preface," This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, eds. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981) xvii.

silent, is not set in the context of a hostile institution, but in the presence of supportive, anti-racist feminists. Yet the immediate and intense "identification" she feels has everything to do with identity and community of sameness. The six Latina women "talk [their] heads off into the night, crying from the impact of such a reunion."[8] We note that "reunion" indicates former unity, but these women did not know each other personally, but rather from their shared base in both the Latina context and the feminist community. The "reunion" is not only of individual women coming together from places of isolation, for the possibility of their connection with each other allows Moraga to feel "every part" of her self as present to her. In other words, a "reunion" takes place within herself as well as among the women.

Feminist autography experiences the overlapping of communities (Jewish and lesbian for example)[9] as a circling

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[8] Moraga, "Preface" xvii.

[9] The linking of these two "communities" indicates some of the flexibility and fuzziness of the word. The issue is problematic in the feminist "community," as Rebecca Gordon's review of Joan Nestle's new book shows. Nestle asserts "'that Lesbians are a people. . . . As a people, we have struggled to preserve our people's ways, the culture of women loving women.'" Gordon says, "If [we are a people] we are different from other peoples, who first acquired their cultural identites from their families. Certainly our families did not teach us how to be lesbians! . . . I tend to think that while women have probably always performed lesbian acts, the possibility of <u>being</u> a lesbian, and certainly the existence of lesbian cultures, are relatively new phenomena." Rebecca Gordon, "Flouting and Flaunting," rev. of <u>A Restricted Country</u>, by Joan Nestle, <u>Women's Review of Books</u> April, 1988: 15. Neither writer doubts that

within circles of identities. As the interior and exterior (self/culture/community) groupings lose distinction, the dividing lines between this and that within the self and within one's various "worlds" blur, reform, shift, and regroup. The extent to which the feminist community exists as writing is in part the writing of these complexities of feminist self. That is, this writing (of) multiple selves, tracing the various relations of power, and developing resistances to the dominant internalized discourses, in large part constitutes a feminist community. Here, national lines blur, even those of language, as translations make an international connection possible for the literate feminist. Even taking into account the European/western/North American distortions of emphasis, of reforming in our own image what these words might mean, Robin Morgan's assertion of the similarities underlying difference in Sisterhood is Global is impressive:

> . . . the most basic similarity of all is the sister in search of the self: 'self identity' (Indonesia and Poland), 'an articulation of selfhood' (Portugal), 'self-realization' (Lebanon and Pakistan), 'self-image' (Zimbabwe), '[women thirst to] see with their own eyes, think with their own minds' (Italy), 'it's time to begin with ourselves' (USSR), 'the right to be oneself' (Finland).[10]

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lesbians are a community--only the history and form of that community are at issue.

[10] Robin Morgan, "Introduction," Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology, ed. Robin Morgan (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1984) 36. The assumptions (and the privileges) that characterize this collection invite examination of the colonizing potential of United States' feminist discourse, despite Morgan's scrupulous attempts to decenter the collection. It is a

Feminist ethics and strategies focus insistently on the question of personal identity in the context of political and cultural frameworks. One of the most influential documents in the United States' women's movement has been the "Black Feminist Statement" by the Combahee River Collective.[11] It provides a history of contemporary Black feminism and discusses Black feminist issues and practice (210). The manifesto balances between conventional revolutionary language ("struggle against our oppression" [211]) and personal, direct speech ("Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious" [211]). In addition to the assertion of Black feminism's distinctiveness from white feminism, lesbian separatism, or Black male liberation movements, the collective declares, "We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for our selves, our sisters and our community" (212). They present a view of politics, of community, and of subjectivity that continues to inform international feminism: "This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially radical politics come directly out of our own

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fine example of Marilyn Frye's bind: to do anything internationally is to do the wrong thing, if one is invested with white privilege.

[11] In This Bridge Called My Back 210-218. References will appear in my text.

identity" (212). What is particularly interesting for my purposes is the use of the word "identity." Here it is given a collective meaning. Yet, even in the singular, the assertion of personal selfhood as part of a collective is implied in the concept of "identity politics." "I" and "we" take on increasingly subtle distinctions and connections. The feminist reader and writer of self participates in the requirement of "a politically conscious feminist criticism" which must attend to "categories of difference" that are aware of "the culture that glues together, but that also seeps and explodes from, interlocking structures of dominance and submission."[12] Recognizing, and inscribing, "categories of difference" means that the "interlocking structures" of power are being unlocked in feminist autography. The interest in "difference," then, is at the crux of identity and of community, not with the lightness of play the word "difference" evokes in some contexts, but with the realization that difference carries power.

The word "difference" has acquired such a freight of significances and echoes and subtle reverberations that I feel quite free to add my own small voice to the chorus without having to take into account every nuance of the word.[13] My concern with it is in particular the relations

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[12] Catharine R. Stimpson, "Introduction," in Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship, ed. Shari Benstock (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 3-4.

[13] On my shelf at this moment I can see the following titles: Writing and Difference, The Critical Difference,

of difference in so far as self and community embody (each and both) difference from and difference within. The recognition, acknowledgement, acceptance and most importantly, the definition, of "difference" is an ideological and an ethical issue for feminists of every context. Feminists must be wary of their own (and others') eagerness to accept 'difference." It may not be merely a clever deconstructive device for exposing the internal contradictions inevitable in language, or for revealing the falsehoods of monolithic constructs. It may also be a reinscription of division, a reinforcement of separation, negation, imbalance. I mean that the idea of "difference" is not to be trusted without question. It is terrifically vulnerable to the purposes of those who have the power and the desire to sustain and perpetuate the discourse of difference while speaking from a center of traditional authority (i.e., male and/or white). Robin Morgan speaks of the impulse to affirm difference as an aspect of the "sensible desire to be as unlike the odious oppressor as possible, even unto claiming for oneself the dubious distinctions of difference by which he has done the labeling in the first place."[14] Morgan does not dismiss the usefulness of "difference" altogether. But she limits its

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Writing and Sexual Difference, Making a Difference, "Race," Writing, and Difference.

[14] Robin Morgan, The Anatomy of Freedom: Feminism, Physics, and Global Politics (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1984) 45.

value to a conditional fluidity as "part of a coming-to-consciousness phase," warning that

> the institutionalizing of it as a permanent, serious thread of theoretical thinking is ultimately counterproductive and in fact destructive, since at its essence such thinking affirms not individual uniqueness within a spectrum of human commonality but group difference--always a highly dangerous compartamentalization which leads ineluctably to racism, sexism, classism. . . .[15]

Morgan is talking about the tendency of some feminists to fix sexual difference as an absolute, but her argument is applicable to racial or ethnic difference as well. The main point of her concern, the affirmation of "group difference," must be taken into account in the light of the danger that attention to "human commonality" will be defined by the dominant group. The dominant group's assertion of that common humanity will erase distinction and deny the possibility of defining what "common humanity" is from the point of view of an oppressed group.

Trinh Minh-ha in her "Introduction" to the special issue of Discourse, "The Inappropriate(d) Other," asserts that "Difference should neither be defined by the dominant sex nor by the dominant culture."[16] Like other deconstructive theorists, Trinh Minh-ha seems to desire the dismantling of an idea of sameness or identity as a gesture towards affirming difference (and "deferring to infinity the

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[15] Morgan, The Anatomy of Freedom 45.

[16] Trinh Minh-ha, "Introduction" in Discourse 8 (Fall-Winter 86-87) 5. I would suggest that sameness also should not be defined by the dominant group.

layers whose totality forms 'I'").[17] She says ". . . the point is . . . patiently to dismantle the very notion of core (be it static or not) and identity" (30). Nevertheless, her argument must rely on identifiable qualities--they are essential in the very idea of "difference," and these qualities, if we are speaking of people, can be seen as identities, as identifiable selves. Trinh Minh-ha shares Morgan's view when she asserts that "Difference reduced to sexual identity is thus posited to justify and conceal exploitation" (32), and that "[t]he search and the claim for an essential female/ethnic identity-difference today can never be anything more than a move within the male-is-norm-divide-and-conquer trap" (my emphasis, 32). I agree that the search for essentials must be entrapment. But I also feel that the absolute voiding of identity, of subjectivity, of "I"-ness (by linking it to "absolute value" or to "authority" [29, 33]) is to avoid hearing one's own voice in the speaking of identity and difference. Trinh Minh-ha quotes Audre Lorde in an affirmation of both sameness and difference and claims both for herself in her assertion that correct differentiation takes place in "speaking near by or together with" rather than "speaking for and about" (33).[18]

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[17] Trinh Minh-ha, "Difference: 'A Special Third World Women Issue'" in Discourse 8: 29. Subsequent references to this article will appear in the text.

[18] Trinh Minh-ha 33. The Lorde quote reads, "The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries . . . but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries."

Some of the difficulties here may be what Henry Gates is thinking of when he says, "To attempt to appropriate our own [African or Afro-American] discourses by using Western critical theory uncritically is to substitute one mode of neocolonialism for another."[19] For feminists of any colour to use any critical discourse uncritically would be to substitute the dominant (male) discourse for our own, and as I have been attempting to show, feminist discourse is necessarily self-critical, self-conscious--because it embodies its own differences. Black/lesbian/Native/white/ Jewish feminist discourse IS the feminist community. Unlike the concerns of mainstream criticism (even marginalized mainstream, such as Gates represents), which must remind itself of the "ideological subtext which any critical theory reflects and embodies, and the relation which this subtext bears to the production of meaning,"[20] the ideological text of feminist discourse, including (and especially) feminist autography, is the text. I do not mean to suggest that feminist writing has no "unconscious," that feminist writers of the self have some privileged powers of language that allow them to escape the internal contradictions that befall other writers, but rather that feminist writing invites its

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In "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," Sister/Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1984) 70.

[19] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes." In 'Race,' Writing, and Difference, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 15.

[20] Gates 15.

own differences to work as correction, as modification, as an aspect of the dynamic of its ideology. In no way does this view cast women of colour in the role of "difference" working as corrective. Rather , women engaged in feminist communities, both of discourse and of "action" (if such a distinction makes any sense), work to correct each other. Of the feminist community, Cherrie Moraga writes,

> Our strategy is how we cope--how we measure and weigh what is to be said and when, what is to be done and how, and to whom and to whom and to whom, daily deciding/risking who it is we can call an ally, call a friend (whatever that person's skin, sex, or sexuality). We are women without a line. We are women who contradict each other.[21]

The ambiguity of being "without a line" suggests both that no "correct line," no circumscribing ideology, determines our decisions and also that we accept no dividing line, no established boundaries separating us from each other on the basis of anything but our own actions, decisions, choices. "Contradicting each other" is clearly a positive feminist value.

To take on "otherness" is part of the self-consciousness that seems to be the constant process of feminist community and identity. Teresa de Lauretis argues that

> different forms of consciousness [consciousness of self, class, race] are grounded, to be sure, in one's personal history; but that history--one's identity--is interpreted or reconstructed by each of us within the horizon of meanings and knowledges available in the culture at given historical moments, a horizon that

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[21] Moraga, This Bridge Called My Back xix.

> also includes modes of political commitment and struggle. Self and identity, in other words, are always grasped and understood within particular discursive configurations.[22]

Part of the feminist "practice" of self-consciousness is the practice of becoming conscious of the "discursive configurations" that make up various communities. The tensions between the individual and the community produce change, not stasis.

Gloria Anzaldúa in a very recent essay reveals the ongoingness of feminist self-correction: "[w]e no longer allow white women to efface us or suppress us. Now we do it to each other."[23] Anzaldúa is distressed by the "othering" she observes among feminists of colour who wish to recreate the security of a unified identity rejecting "the white

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[22] Teresa de Lauretis, "Issues, Terms, and Contexts" 8. Elsewhere de Lauretis speaks of the general influence of feminist self-consciousness in her intellectual life. In speaking of the development of her theoretical approach to cinema and narrative, she adds to her reading of Foucault and Althusser, MacKinnon and Woolf, this realization: "I had absorbed as my experience (through my own history and engagement in social reality and in the gendered spaces of feminist communities) the analytical and critical method of feminism, the practice of self-consciousness" (her emphasis). In "The Technology of Gender," in Technologies of Gender (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 20.

[23] "En Rapport, In Opposition: Cobrando Cuentas A Las Nuestras" in Sinister Wisdom 33 (Fall, 1987) 11. Subsequent references will appear in the text. Note the use of English and Spanish in Anzaldúa's title. Latina feminists have begun to speak difference within sameness using this linguistic strategy. Patricia Yaeger includes the use of a foreign language in women's writing as an "emancipatory strategy" that puts "the hegemonic structure of the primary language entirely into question." Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 41. When the writer's mother tongue is different from the dominant language this effect is surely intensified.

looking Indian, . . . the Asian with the white lover, the Native woman who brings her white girlfriend to the Pow Wow, the Chicana who doesn't speak Spanish" (12). Attributing the construction of the "Other" to a "frame of reference [that] is still white, male, and heterosexual" (14), Anzaldúa wants a complicated balancing of identities for women of colour in which "[c]olored feminists must present a united front in front of whites and other groups" even though "the fact is we are not united" (14-15). The "discursive configuration" that Anzaldúa wishes to see evolve is one which maintains a difficult and mobile sensibility of openness to difference, while recalling the danger (indeed, the liklihood) of being dominated. The basis of the un-unified unity is a flexible conception of self:

> Nothing is more difficult than identifying emotionally with a cultural alterity, with the Other. Alter: to make different; to castrate. Altercate: to dispute angrily. Alter ego: another self or another aspect of oneself (sic). Alter idem: another of the same kind. Nothing is harder than identifying with an interracial identity, with a mestizo identity. One has to leave the permanent boundaries of a fixed self. . . . It is easier to retreat to the safety of the difference behind racial, cultural, class borders. Because our awareness of the Other as object often swamps our awareness of ourselves as subject, it is hard to maintain a fine balance between cultural ethnicity and the continuing survival of that culture. . . . How much must remain the same, how much must change (14).

The cultures that Anzaldúa is talking about are mixed, held together in her discourse by feminist ideologies. This ethic of social change and self-determination requires attention

to differences as a basis of self-affirmation but that takes into account the belief that "[t]he leap into self-affirmation goes hand in hand with being critical of self" (14). She says that "[b]y highlighting similarities, downplaying divergences, that is, by rapprochement between self and Other it is possible to build a syncretic relationship" (15). Anzaldúa is a woman of colour speaking explicitly to other feminists of colour. What is the place from which a white feminist can enter the "rapprochement" she hopes to build? Pat Parker offers a suggestion:

> For the white person
> who wants to know
> how to be my friend
> The first thing you do is to forget i'm Black,
> Second, you must never forget that i'm Black.[24]

Difference from sameness, sameness within difference: only an ideology of extraordinary flexibility can inform and embody the varied shades of feminist identity as it is articulated within and by feminist autography.

The white critic has here to acknowledge the danger of making with her words a totalizing or monolithic construct that assumes commonality by appropriating the cultural particularities articulated by women of colour as part of their feminist/ethnic resources. Stimpson warns that "feminist discourse can absorb and sponge up all women under the rubric of 'woman.'"[25] This problem has another aspect:

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[24] From Movements in Black (San Francisco: Diana Press, 1978), quoted by Morgan, in The Anatomy of Freedom, 198.
[25] Stimpson, "Introduction" 3.

the attributing of special powers to women of colour. Some writers of self are resisting the weight of this image-making which is the alternate side of the racist coin of erasure or disdain. In "I Am Not Your Princess (especially for Dee Johnson)," Chrystos speaks her refusal to participate:

> Sandpaper between two cultures which tear one another apart I'm not
> a means by which you can reach spiritual understanding or even
> learn to do beadwork
> I'm only willing to tell you how to make fry bread
> 1 cup flour, spoon of salt, spoon of baking powder
> Stir Add milk or water or beer until it hold together
> Slap each piece into rounds Let rest
> Fry in hot grease until golden
> This is Indian food only if you know that Indian is a government word
> which has nothing to do with our names for ourselves
> I won't chant for you
> I admit no spirituality to you
> I will not sweat with you or ease your guilt with fine turtle tales
> I will not wear dancing clothes to read poetry or explain hardly
> anything at all
> I don't think your attempts to understand us are going to work so
> I'd rather
> you left us in whatever peace we can still scramble up after all you continue to do
> If you send me one more damn flyer about how to heal myself for $300
> with special feminist counseling I'll probably set fire to something
> If you tell me one more time that I'm wise I'll throw up on you
> Look at me
> See my confusion loneliness fear worrying about all our struggles
> to keep
> what little is left for us
> Look at my heart not your fantasies
> Please don't ever again tell me about your Cherokee great-great
> grandmother

Don't assume I know every other Native Activist in the world personally
or can pronounce names I've never heard
or that I'm expert at the peyote stitch
If you ever
again tell me
how strong I am
I'll lay down on the ground & moan so you'll see
at last my human weakness like your own
I'm not strong I'm scraped
I'm blessed with life while so many I've known are dead
I have work to do dishes to wash a house to clean
There is no magic
See my simple cracked hands which have washed the same things
you wash
See my eyes dark with fear in a house by myself late at night
See that to pity me or to adore me are the same
1 cup flour, spoon of salt, spoon of baking powder & liquid to hold
remember this is only my recipe There are many others
Let me rest
here
at least [26]

This is a complex writing of self that seems stretched between the wish to be seen and the resistance to being seen on white terms, either as "fantasy" or as "native informant."[27] Chrystos addresses the white feminist full of her own (and socially constructed) images of the spiritually gifted, politically engaged, emotionally invulnerable Native woman. The epigraph, "especially for Dee Johnson" (whom we may assume is a friend), allows us to imagine that this poem is part of a particular ongoing conversation, a dialogue of imposition and resistance, of adoration and rejection, in which the adored feels adored because of, and invisible

[26] Chrystos, "I Am Not Your Princess," Sinister Wisdom 33 (Fall 1987) 18-19.
[27] I here use in a vulgar way Gayatri Spivak's recuperation of the anthropological term.

behind, the white construction of Indian culture. Chrystos defines herself here in part by negation and refusal: she will not speak her strengths, but does not disclaim them: "I won't chant for you"; "I admit no spirituality to you." She will not share what cannot be shared, that is that which cannot be acquired by acts of wish or will: "I'm not/ a means by which you can reach spiritual understanding." Nor will she tell "fine turtle tales," teach "beadwork" or listen to wishful kinship stories. The list of her refusals is a list of the impositions of white feminist fantasies about her as a Native woman. She says, "I will . . . explain hardly anything at all" yet the poem is an explaining, a sharing not only of her fry bread recipe but of her self apart from the masks of special knowledge laid over her. The doubleness of this is doubled again by her resigned knowledge that, likely, even this speaking is futile--"I don't think your attempts to understand us are going to work"--but she cannot stop the speaking. Her anger, frustration and cynicism at white feminist middle-classness (epitomized by "special feminist counseling") is layered with her direct challenge (or pleading?), "Look at me/ See my confusion . . ./ Look at my heart." The declaration of simple everyday women's tasks and feelings does not obscure the particularity of Native possibility and pain. The "dancing clothes," the "turtle tales," the sweat lodges exist as do the "loneliness fear worrying about all our

struggles to keep/ what little is left for us." The inscription of self in this poem makes a common ground between the white and the Native woman, as Chrystos invites us to "see" that her hands, her eyes are those of every woman, ordinary, unmagical, and at the same time she affirms that which is hers as Native. In the last lines she asserts individuality, community, and difference: "remember this is only my recipe There are many others."

Claiming identity and refusing representative authority (which she is sure her reader will attribute to her--and indeed, we do), her words "Let me rest/ here/ at least" have a terrible poignancy. "Here" like the fry bread at rest, "here" in the intersections of cultures, "here" in her individual recipe, "here," in this writing, "at least," she speaks in her own name, and so hopes for rest. That name, of course, carries the light from the necessary knowledge that "This is Indian food only if you know that Indian is a government word/ which has nothing to do with our names for ourselves." The power in Chrystos's declaration of her will, her self-definition, has much of its charge in the shifts from presentation (of the masks), resistance, self-assertion and concealment. Unlike some other writings of the self in which we felt the writers' frustration at the inability of language to carry the weight of identity or presence, here the poet's decision and choice of what to give, what to keep are an important part of her subjecthood.

Leslie Marmon Silko's collection, Storyteller,[28] is, as a volume, a text, an extraordinary example of the various exposures and silences that can make up autography. The collection is comprised of short stories, poems, old tales, legends, memories, retellings, and photographs of Silko's family and the Laguna region of New Mexico. Acutely conscious of the links between stories, language, culture, community, and identity, Silko's collection draws from all the sources she has to hand, making the writer herself the "storyteller" of the title, and part of the collection's other storytellers. This is her dedication: "This book is dedicated to the storytellers as far back as memory goes and to the telling which continues and through which they all live and we with them." For Silko, to live and to tell stories (including "the" stories of her culture) are simultaneous acts, just as past and present become simultaneous in the telling. Silko begins with a kind of prose poem account of "Aunt Susie" who "must have realized" that the intrusion of Europeans irrevocably altered the oral traditions "that passed down an entire culture/ by word of mouth/ an entire history/ an entire vision of the world" by "taking the children away from the tellers who had/ in all past generations/ told the children/ an entire culture, an entire identity of a people" (6). Of her aunt's stories Silko says, "I remember only a small part./ But this is what

[28] Leslie Marmon Silko, Storyteller (New York: Seaver Books, 1981). Subsequent references will be in the text.

I remember," and her own writing of "Aunt Susie"'s telling is scrupulously attentive to the layering of oral and written language:

> This is the way Aunt Susie told the story.
> She had certain phrases, certain distinctive words
> she used in her telling.
> I write when I still hear
> her voice as she tells the story.
> People are sometimes surprised
> at her vocabulary, but she was
> a brilliant woman, a scholar
> of her own making
> who has cherished the Laguna stories
> all her life.
> This is the way I remember
> she told this one story
> about the little girl who ran away (7).

The "intertextual crossings" of oral and written traditions are here made explicit.[29] The story as Silko retells it is a long chanting tale of a child who is disappointed in her mother and runs away to drown herself. The mother, hoping to stop the little girl, gathered up her clothing and followed her, calling to her. "Just as her mother was about/ to reach her/ she jumped/ into the lake" (14). The mother in her grief "climbed the mesa home."

> And the little clothing,
> the little moccasins
> that she's brought
> . . .
> she stood on the edge of the high mesa
> and scattered them out.
> . . . and here every one of the little clothing--
> . . .
> they all turned into butterflies.

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[29] See Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, "Black North-American Women Poets in the Semiotics of Culture," in Women, Feminist Identity, and Society in the 1980's, eds. Diaz-Diocaretz and Iris Zavala (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 1985) 46-47.

all colors of butterflies.
And today they say that acoma has more beautiful
butterflies
red ones, white ones, blue ones, yellow ones.
They came
from this little girl's clothing (15).

As part of the telling of "Aunt Susie"'s story, Silko tells us of her experience of listening to the tale, and of her aunt as the teller: "Aunt Susie always spoke the words of the mother to her daughter/ with great tenderness . . . something in her voice . . . implied the tragedy to come./ But when Aunt Susie came to the place/ where the little girl's clothes turned into butterflies/ then her voice would change and I could hear the excitement and wonder/ and the story wasn't sad any longer" (15).[30] The layering of these storytellings makes the community of women telling each other stories, generation upon generation, both a collective and an individual experience in the rewriting.

The associations of old stories, new retellings, Silko's reflections on the "original" experiences of hearing the story, come together as a writing of self in "POEM FOR MYSELF AND MEI: Concerning Abortion" (122-123). Rather than framed as ideological assertion, Silko's feminism seems part of this precisely contextualized writing. Mei-Mei appears as a friend on the acknowledgement page, and the poem begins with a precise place and date: "Chinle to Fort Defiance,

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[30] See her reference to this story in The Delicacy and Strength of Lace, Letters of Leslie Marmon Silko & James Wright, ed. Anne Wright (Saint Paul: Grey Wolf Press, 1985) 70.

April, 1973." The poem itself is the free verse description of a landscape that we might assume the travellers passed through in April, 1973. It begins

> The morning sun
> coming unstuffed with yellow light
> butterflies tumbling loose
> and blowing across the Earth.

The "butterflies" that "fill the sky/ with shimmering yellow wind," are "yellow mustard flowers/ spilling out of the mountain." She says, "I see them with the clarity of ice/ shattered in mountain streams." The last stanza again using the pronoun for the butterflies speaks the grief and inevitablity of this journey:

> They die softly
> against the windshield
> and the iridescent wings
> flutter and cling
> all the way home.

The quiet and beauty of this lyric "concerning abortion" stand easily alone, but with the story of the little girl whose mother could not save her and whose clothes became butterflies, the poem takes on a complexity allowed only by the writing of this self in her community. The loss through abortion, the death of the butterflies, and the legendary mother's grief and acceptance of her loss become a palimpsest of emotional subtleties, whose meaning stays indeterminate. The loveliness of the poem is in contrast to its abrupt, and personal title. To have called the poem so simply "POEM FOR MYSELF AND MEI: Concerning Abortion" makes a kind of feminist writing of self that appears more

personal than many. Yet, the process of autography here connects the ancient story of the dead child whose clothes become butterflies, "Aunt Susie"'s telling, and Silko's personal experience with abortion, central to feminist polemics. Silko situates herself firmly in a community of storytellers and a community of women.[31]

Wendy Rose, like Silko, makes the speaking of self and the telling of old stories a simultaneous experience. For Rose, anger is an important part of the mix she brings together in her telling.[32] "Poet Woman's mitosis: Dividing all the cells apart" makes clear the divisions and identifications felt by this city woman of Hopi and white heritage.[33] The poem begins with an epigraph: "It is a little unfair to the Indian that we expect him to make a permanent transition from a primitive to an ultra-modern

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[31] When she is gathering photographs for Storyteller Silko discovers "that much of what I 'remember' of places and people is actually a memory of the photograph and remembered it as if I had been told about it. . . . Strange to think that you heard something--that you heard someone describe a place or a scene when in fact you saw a picture of it, saw it with your own eyes." In The Delicacy and Strength of Lace 64-65.

[32] I do not mean to suggest that Silko is without anger. Her fiction speaks it with great subtlety and sorrow, and her rage is explicit in the poem "Long time ago." The poem tells of the power contest among witches as the casting of a spell sets revenge in motion: "Set in motion now/ set in motion/ To destroy/ To kill/ . . . Performing the witchery/ for suffering/ for torment/ for the stillborn/ the deformed/ the sterile/ the dead." In Storyteller 130-137.

[33] Wendy Rose, "Poet Woman's mitosis: Dividing all the cells apart," in That's What She Said: Contemporary Poetry and Fiction by Native American Women, ed. Rayna Green (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 206. Other references to Wendy Rose will be from this collection.

citizen overnight--a feat which took us thousands of years to accomplish . . . --J. Poncel, Tucson Indian School, 1950." The arrogance and absurdity of this comment are allowed to speak for themselves and Rose's poem seems almost to ignore it, until the violence of the final image:

> Urban Halfbreed, burro-faced
> no more nor less than the number
> of remembered songs and the learning
> to sing them a new way.
> The Singers are of another generation;
> throats ready with the bell and beat of the sky
> while mine can do no more than mimic
> the sound heard while my hand danced on paper
> looking for the rattle of old words.
> Here I am now: body and heart and soul Hopi,
> details, pinpoints, tongue something else,
> foreign and familiar at once
> like sores that grow and burst
> no matter what.

The title's use of "Poet Woman" links Rose to the ancient native tradition of naming powerful female forces, such as Corn Woman, Spider Grandmother and so on. The Indian School official's patronizing acknowledgement of difference, and his tolerant discouragement about making a unified citizenry, speaks the other side of Rose's anguish. Here, as "Poet Woman," Rose is doing the dividing, and as herself is being divided. This self in its other proper name, "Urban Halfbreed" (indicated by capital letters), is a racial and localized category, defined outwardly by those words, by that "burro" face, in an "ultra-modern" context. The definition she makes for herself, however, is a demanding one: "no more nor less than the number/ of remembered songs and the learning/ to sing them a new way."

The old songs must be recreated in a new singing, and the process of that transformation is the making of self. Rose describes her awareness of the contrast between the ancient "Singers" and herself as "mimic." She declares the division in an assertion of presence and of process that inscribes her strength and her revulsion and dismayed resignation: "Here I am now: body heart and soul Hopi." This declaration seems to encompass the whole metaphoric being; yet "something else" is also present. Triviality may exist in the "details, pinpoints," but "tongue" cannot be insignificant for the singer. The wholeness of her Hopi self, the fragmentations of the other self, "foreign and familiar at once," are made violations of the wholesome body, natural and diseased at the same time, "like sores that grow and burst." There is no treatment, no cure for this affliction of dividedness, of the "something else." Only the fact (in the poem) of the "mitosis" of Poet Woman makes the division tolerable for it is she who makes the "sores . . . grow," another instance of cell division, one that makes speaking the self, even with its painful divisions, possible, a new way of singing.

For Wendy Rose that speaking seems most personal and direct in its multiple connections in "Epilog (to Lost Copper)."[34] This poem names Native Indian women poets, making with the naming a sense of the community that exists

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[34] I have not been able to locate "Lost Copper."

outside the poems, and the ways the writing makes the community live:

> Drop a kernel of corn on a rock
> and say a prayer. It will shoot up
> proud and green, tassel out,
> pull the next crop from the thunderheads
> That's the Hopi way.
> If the corn doesn't grow
> you eat the rocks,
> drink the clouds
> on the distant plains.
>
> Silko and Allen and Harjo and me:
> our teeth are hard
> from the rocks we eat. (209)[35]

The hope, the wit, and the wry acceptance of "the Hopi way" in hard times (literally), make the common ground of these poets their faithful optimism, their difficulties (the "rocks" are certainly part of the common ground) and, most importantly, their connection with each other. In this writing of self, Rose speaks through the varied languages of poetic metaphor and of Hopi tradition. As well, she names others and herself as a community of identity, not as sameness or uniformity but as necessary nourishment. The feminist community is reinscribed in the autography of Rose and Silko, where the discourse of the personal and the political is recast in yet another "powerful and womanly series of choices."[36]

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[35] Leslie Marmon Silko, Paula Gunn Allen, Joy Harjo, all Native feminist poets. Samples of their writing can be found in Rayna Green's collection and in The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of the United States, ed. Dexter Fisher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980).

[36] Adrienne Rich, Sources, in Your Native Land, Your Life (New York: Norton, 1986) 27.

The writers I have selected to give voice to the issues in the United States' women's movement, and to show how those issues are treated, could be replaced by other writers. The "conclusions" would not have been different, because no conclusions can be drawn--except those that affirm the process that the texts and writers have enacted. That process of giving voice to that which has been silenced is consistent in the ethics and actions of contemporary feminists. The individual writer enacts this process within her self, engaging in dialogues or even with multiple voices of self. Bringing to voice parts of one's self that one has had reason to keep silent is frightening, painful, and even dangerous. An analogous process takes place in the feminist community as voices demand the right to be heard, and to be heard on the same basis or principle that informs the women's movement: the worth of individual or personal identity. When that identity is no longer seen as a monad, an isolated and alienated being, hearing only its own echoes, shoring its fragments only against its own ruin, then writing the self can be recognized as a social and political act. United States' feminists have chosen not to abandon the principle of personal identity, but rather to discover in it, through various processes, a selfhood as complex as the communities that are part of its discourse.

I began this thesis with the formalist issues of autobiographical theory because that theory provides the only background we have for a discussion of the relation of auto to graphie. The narratological and generic problems of autobiography were of far less interest to me than the configurations of the writing (and written) subject. Recent feminist interrogations of theories of text and subjectivity have influenced my understanding of the usefulness of contemporary theory in providing a language to describe, for example, intertextual relations. As well, feminist theorists reveal the limitations of psychoanalytic and deconstructive readings for feminist texts. The dividing line between theory and practice, in the discourse of feminism, is non-existent. And feminist critics, theorists, and poets are all likely to write themselves into whatever they write as particpants in the feminist community.

To write the feminist self is to make the feminist community. Audre Lorde's writing of her specifically female cancer as a "Black lesbian feminist experience" makes in the writing a community of women of all colours and sexual orientations who are subject to breast cancer. That she could write it, however, is made possible by her particular strengths, and by the living community of women around her. Kate Millett's multiple and deeply personal writing of self speaks of the communal consciousness of a feminist identification with other women. Like Adrienne Rich's,

Millett's alliance with women is neither safe nor easy. It requires a recognition of one's self in the madwoman, the victim, the vicious one, not only because of madness or weakness, but because of a common condition in the world. In Rich, history is personal and communal, and the body in its experience of reality is the precise embodiment of history. Every writer this thesis has discussed makes her self the ground of her writing, and the scene of her choices, and that writing becomes the ground of her community. The process is recursive: the selves written are transformed in the writing as the communities they change change them. Feminist autography is the place where we "decide one more time."[37]

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[37] Andrea Dworkin, Right-Wing Women (New York: Wideview/Perigree Books, 1983) 237.

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